LA COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

a new name

ennezine

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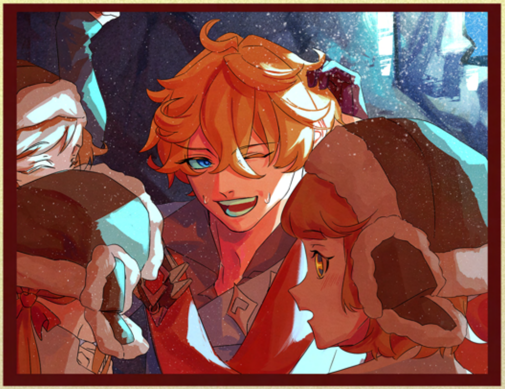
a new name

HEAD & COVER ARTIST
ifiori_delmale

MOD
kaveh_obsessed

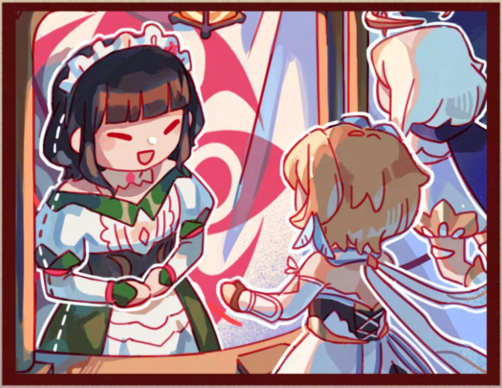
ennezine



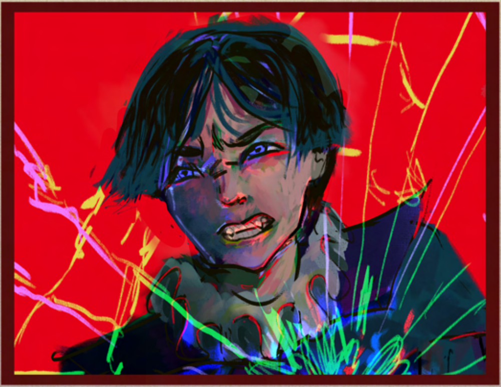
06-07 | WIJCAI

The Tsaritsa's plan? To put on a play, one with all eleven Harbingers disguised as the performers. Sure they might be suspicious of a troupe from Snezhnaya, but a lot less so than if even just one of the Fatui Harbingers entered their city, let alone multiple. With the right costumes and fake paperwork, they'd be none the wiser. The play she chose? One so on the nose that no one would suspect a thing — Commedia Dell'Arte.

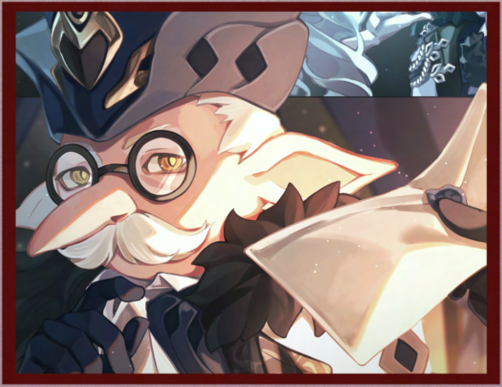
08-14 | THEOS



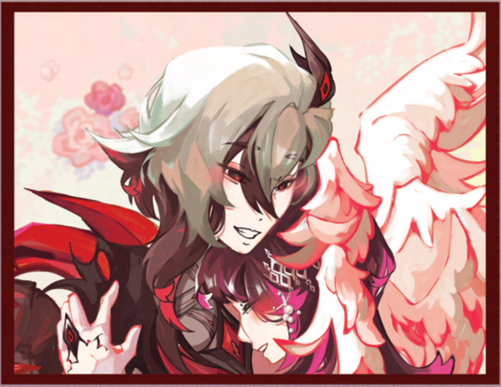
15 | LIRAMIC



16-17 | POL x ISABELLA



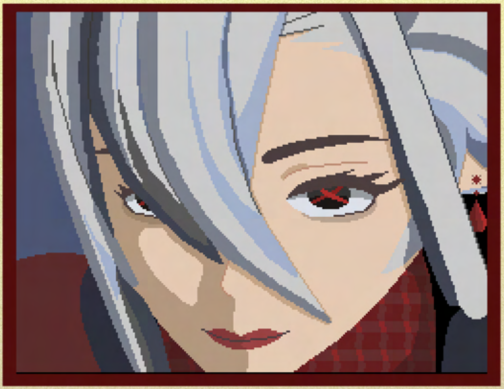
18-21 | SUN x PILLOW



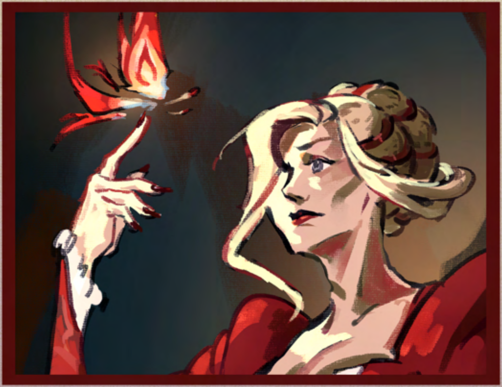
22-24 | HOSHIYUET x KESTREL

The Captain furrowed his eyebrows, annoyed. He hadn't said a word the entire night and suddenly he was being insulted by this clown of a Grandmaster. Even within the Harbingers, no one dared to say a word against him, yet this man… Somehow, it made Capitano a little baffled, unsure how to respond. He didn't want to stoop down to Varka's level, finding his whole demeanor distasteful, but staying quiet was akin to letting the insult slip.

26-28 | ETTEEE



25 | QUIN



34 | UHOHBIGYIKE

"You wouldn't do that to me, would you, Jei Wei? After everything I loaned you, you wouldn't just leave me?" Pantalone lowers himself into his lap, running his fingers down his chest, the glob of blood still stuck to the tip of his glove is smearing into the white undershirt, coloring the fabric a sickening red. His other hand lowered, the tip of his karambit pressed against the meaty area just above his kneecap, blade rocking back and forth in his hand.

29-33 | SUN

The Gnosis rests between her fingers, her eyes scanning the offending piece, still alight with a soft teal glow. Is this what she had been labouring for since the moment she stepped foot in Mondstadt? In her eyes, it is a hideous piece, something to discard rather than cherish, but she was not chosen for this mission because of her opinions. She was chosen for her calculating ruthlessness and her meticulous planning, both of which granted her yet another success.

39-45 | ISABELLA

Although Columbina hadn't met a human before, she'd taken a peek into the carriage as the Princess was leaving with that man, and he'd looked very kind! The world was large. Even if there were some bad apples, she was sure not everyone was bad. Come what may, Columbina was sure that she would manage to solve any problem and come home safe. And when she did, Columbina would be ready to welcome her with a smile.

35-38 | ETTEEE x BRIOCHE

46-47 | PANDORA

The sound of heels was replaced with the Fair Lady's stern voice emanating from the doorway. Childe briefly considered his chances of just running and hiding away from that woman when two voices that sounded like his master and his mother scolded him simultaneously. ‘No disciple of mine will run from a fight’, Skirk snapped, her words overlapping with his mother’s last words to him, ‘be good to them Ajax’.

48-55 | KESTREL

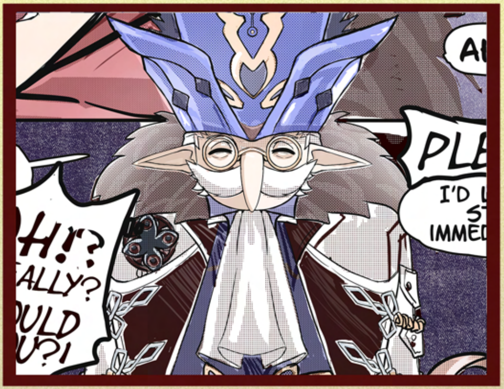
56-58 | BRKNTEACUP x ETTEEE

59 | VERTEBRA CONFIT

60-61 | GHIRONDA

“Do you understand, Lyney?” Father asks, snapping Lyney out of the invisible strings of a magician’s backstage. Her voice is controlled, cool steel once more, and Lyney thinks he understands a bit better what she means when she says take. Her eyes bore into him, trapping Lyney in place with a gaze teetering just too close on the edge of insane. “Do you?”
Lyney nods. There is a lump in his throat that is making it hard to swallow.

62-67 | ECLIPSE x MELODY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68-69 | FIAMMA ROSATO

til she offered him
new mission.

70-74 | BONEWOLF x ISABELLA

76-93 | MERCH ART SECTION

OUT FROM UNDERNEATH THEIR GNOSIS

by THEOS | goldgalaxytea

The Tsaritsa grinned as Arlecchino handed her the Hydro Archon's Gnosis. Now only one more Gnosis remained until they had all seven and could set their grand plan in motion. The final Gnosis was that of the Pyro Archon. Though by now, the God of War had long grown wise to the Fatui's tricks, having heard all about their exploits in the other five nations. As a result, they would need to be a lot stealthier this time.

The Tsaritsa's plan? To put on a play, one with all eleven Harbingers disguised as the performers. Sure they might be suspicious of a troupe from Snezhnaya, but a lot less so than if even just one of the Fatui Harbingers entered their city, let alone multiple. With the right costumes and fake paperwork, they'd be none the wiser. The play she chose? One so on the nose that no one would suspect a thing – Commedia Dell'Arte.

Some of the Harbingers liked the idea, excited to put on the play despite it just being a cover. While others hated it, only going along with it because they were forced to. Whether they wanted to or not, all eleven Harbingers were required to go on this mission and be a part of the play. For who could defy her majesty, the Tsaritsa?

Pierro's role was Pierrot. The Director, in all his long life, never cared for the arts and he wasn't going to start now. The Jester wasn't pleased to be playing his namesake, but if it was an order from the Tsaritsa herself then he would go along with it without any complaints. And so, he made sure the rest of the Harbingers fell in line and did as they were told.

Which was hard to do when he was scolding them in a clown costume. It was hilarious seeing the tall and intimidating Director of the fearsome Fatui Harbingers dressed in such a ridiculous outfit. Especially when he had to pretend to cry, his face serious and as unmoving as stone while he did his best to act so emotionally. The rest of the Harbingers couldn't take him seriously, laughing at him behind his back.

Il Dottore's role was Il Dottore. The Doctor didn't care to waste his precious time on a play, not when he could be in his lab with his experiments. Luckily for him, he technically wasn't the only Dottore. He sent one of his segments in his place, one that was younger and more eager to act than he was. It was the perfect solution – for Dottore.

For everyone else, his segment was a nightmare. He was bossy, demanding things be done a certain way and if they're not he throws a tantrum. He got too into character, loving the sound of his own voice and spouting nonsense to anyone who could hear him. Regardless if someone wanted to be in the play or not, everyone hated working with him and wished he was gone. Numerous times "unfortunate" accidents would befall him during practice, though sadly none were enough to stop him from performing.

Columbina's role was Columbina. She was excited to dress up and act, especially since most of her scenes were with Arlecchino. She rehearsed her lines any chance she could get, to the point that it annoyed her fellow Harbingers. Even the ones that were excited to act were starting to grow annoyed by her constant practicing.

When she wasn't rehearsing her lines, she was making their costumes. She was even more excited to sew everyone's costumes than she was to practice, if that was even possible. The Damslette took her job seriously, getting upset whenever someone didn't wear their costume properly or mistreated it. The offender would find themselves on the receiving end of the Knave's frightening gaze, glaring them down until they fixed their mistakes. They'd only be safe from her wrath once Columbina's smile returned.

Arlecchino's role was Harlequin. She was a busy woman as the Father of many children. She did not care to waste her time on the play, but for Columbina's sake, she could spare some time and pretend like she was having fun. The role she played was not one she would have chosen on her own, nor was her character one that she particularly liked, but she did not complain since her character was so close to Columbina's.

Despite not caring about the play, she kept the others in check just to make Columbina happy. If someone didn't want to rehearse their lines, she would give them a "polite" reason to do so. If someone didn't show up to practice, she dragged them there one way or another. If someone messed up their costume, she'd glare at them until they fixed it. If anyone made Columbina unhappy for any reason, she wouldn't hesitate to remind them why she's the 4th Harbinger. As long as Columbina was happy, she was happy. And as a result, so were the rest of the harbingers.

Pulcinella's role was Pulcinella. Like Pierro, he didn't care for the play but went along with it purely for the sake of the mission. He was old and didn't care about performing, but he still acted to the best of his abilities. Which wasn't saying much, since he took the acting way too seriously. His movements and delivery were too stiff, his acting much too robotic to seem natural or even be entertaining.

He was also having a hard time with keeping the other harbingers in line. Though his method was a lot less intense than the Knave's, more like a nagging old grandfather. As such, the others didn't care to listen to him. Especially when he was in his silly looking costume. At the very least, Childe listened to him. Though he wasn't one of the ones refusing to cooperate.

Scaramouche's role was Scaramouche. He hated acting with a burning passion and he hated his role like it was his fourth betrayal. He spewed complaints more than he spoke his lines. He refused to cooperate no matter who he was working with. Even more so if it was Columbina or Childe, their excitement was nauseating. The higher ranked Harbingers had to force him to do his job and even then he continued to complain and cause problems.

He purposely broke props, hiding the evidence so no one would realize until it was too late. One time Dottore's segment fell through a crate that the Balladeer had messed with, unfortunately sustaining no injuries but he had so many splinters he looked like a porcupine. Another time a hanging prop had almost crushed Childe. If it hadn't been for his fast reflexes, he would've been injured badly. He especially butted heads with the Knave, constantly fighting the woman when she confronted him for "accidentally" tearing his costume for the tenth time that week. Despite being reprimanded by the Tsaritsa herself, it didn't stop him from having more "accidents".

Sandrone's role was Sandrone. She didn't care for the play, hating that it took her away from her work, as she'd rather be working on her machines. At first she tried to send her machines to act in her place, but since they weren't her it didn't work. She complained it was unfair, gesturing to

Dottore's segment. But that was a different matter, since his segments were him while her machines were not her.

She would constantly build machines during practice and refused to stop, so they put her talents to good use. They tasked her with building machines to use for minor background characters, as long as she played her role. Her attitude changed completely, now eager and invested in the play. Though still at times, she would lose herself in her work to the point no one could get through to her.

La Signora 's role was La Signora. After just recently coming back from the ashes like a phoenix, she was eager to prove herself after her failed mission. She loved her role and played it perfectly, as if it had been made for her. In fact, she played it so well that it began to annoy even the more enthusiastic actors. Her insults spoken "in character" sounded much too genuine to be acting. The only part of her role that she disliked was the fact that her husband in the play was Pantalone. He annoyed her to no end and she couldn't stand to be around the greedy man, so she was pleased that her character didn't like him either. Though the annoyance was worth it since she got to be mean and make trouble for him all throughout the play.

She also helped to keep the others in check, her harsh words much more effective than Pulcinella's nagging. She watched everyone closely with her uncovered eye, insults ready the moment she saw someone slacking off. Not only that, but she would criticize their acting. If their performance wasn't up to her standards, then they would be reprimanded and shown how to do it correctly. She had succeeded in bringing the Tsaritsa two – would have been three if it weren't for that foolish puppet – and she would not fail her majesty again.

Pantalone's role was Pantalone. He hated that he had to waste his time on something as frivolous as a play. If it was something that wouldn't make money, then it was a pointless endeavor. Though for the sake of the Tsaritsa – mainly her threats to cut off his mora – he could deal with it. Plus it didn't hurt that he got to play himself without a mask (ironically while wearing a mask).

Though the Fair Lady was a major grievance, constantly bothering him in the name of "practice". She claimed it was her lines but the smile she hid behind her gloved hand said otherwise. She was quickly giving him a headache everytime they interacted, which was far too often for his taste. He couldn’t wait for this mission to be over so he could stop pretending to be her lover and could reunite with his “actual” lover, mora.

Il Capitano’s role was Il Capitano. He also didn’t care about putting on a play, only going along with it since it was the Tsaritsa’s order. He followed the script to a T, reciting every line perfectly and remembering every single choreographed movement. The only problem – his size and strength.

He was used to the battlefield, he wasn’t used to being careful or having to hold back his strength. His large frame kept accidentally bumping into the others and knocking them down. The props weren’t sparred either, the wood falling apart like wet paper underneath his large hands. He’s a fighter and has never acted so accidents kept happening, much to some Harbinger's dismay and to others’ amusement.

Tartaglia’s role was Tartaglia. He was just as excited as Columbina, finding the activity almost as fun as fighting. After constantly playing pretend with his siblings all his life, plus Fatui work, Childe was an amazing actor. He was so enthusiastic and having so much fun it was annoying to the ones that didn’t want to be there. Especially when he tried to get them more excited about the play or dragged them along to practice.

His antics resulted in a lot of fights, which to most would be bad, but to him were a dream come true. He was delighted to act and he was even more delighted to spar with his fellow Harbingers. Though that didn’t last long once they realized he was enjoying it and would lead to him pressuring them to practice even more. Though that didn’t stop him from continuing to try and spread his enthusiasm.

* * *

After many hours of chaotic practice, it was finally time to put on their play.

Their entrance into Natlan went as planned, the guards carefully watching them with the usual suspicion of those that hailed from Snezhnaya, but no more than that. But they did not suspect or uncover their true identities, their costumes the perfect disguise. They were let in and set up their stage, the Pyro Archon watching from her secluded booth above the audience of her people.

With the spotlight shining upon them, they began their show.

Despite all their practice, it was still a bit chaotic. Problems arose with props breaking and actors whose hearts weren't truly into it or not performing the greatest. But the Harbingers were Harbingers for a reason, they quickly adjusted, playing off any problem or accident as a planned part of the play. No matter what incident befell them, they pressed on, the audience none the wiser to their true identities and intentions.

As soon as the finale began, Signora and Scaramouche quietly exited the stage. While the audience was immersed in the drama, they snuck away, careful to remain out of sight of the guards. They reached the Pyro Archon's private booth, the two Harbingers swiftly overloading and superconducting the two guards standing watch outside. They caught the guards as they fell unconscious, gently setting them down so they didn't make any noise and alert the Archon of their presence.

The Harbingers on stage sang louder, drowning out the sound of Signora encasing the lower half of the Pyro Archon in ice, trapping her in her seat. Before the Archon could react, Scaramouche electrocuted her. The Archon fell limp against the back of her chair, dazed from the superconduct racing through her along with both elements reacting with the Pyro inside her.

Scaramouche reached towards the Archon's chest, but a gloved hand swatted him away before he could make contact.

"What are you doing?!" Scaramouche whispered angrily, glaring up at the woman towering over him.

"I will not let you take another Gnosis from me." Signora glared back, her words venomous.

"We don't have time for this!" Scaramouche eyed the stage, noticing the other Harbingers were almost done with the finale.

"You're right, we don't." Signora pushed past the Balladeer and snatched the Gnosis out of the Pyro Archon's chest. She ignored Scaramouche angrily spitting insults, instead sending a Crimson Lotus Moth towards the stage. It landed on a fuse, its fire lighting the fireworks.

The fireworks fired off into the sky, signaling the end of the show and that they had successfully acquired the Gnosis. They lit up the sky, the noise drowning out the sound of Signora and Scaramouche's escape. It also covered up the sound of the Pyro Archon awaking in a blaze of fury as she realized her Gnosis was gone. She melted the ice off of her and shouted for the guards, but no one could hear her. The audience and guards were distracted by the loud finale and even louder fireworks. Along with the loud clapping of the audience's applause, the people of Natlan unknowingly assisting in a crime committed against their very own Archon.

The Harbingers on stage held hands as they took their final bow. Their lowered heads hid their smirks, as they knew that the others had succeeded in acquiring the Gnosis while the people applauding them were none the wiser. They left the stage quickly, leaving all the props behind in their rush. There was no time to take them, but in the grand scheme they were unimportant, having already served their purpose.

Signora and Scaramouche met up with the others outside, victoriously holding the Pyro Gnosis. The eleven Harbingers left, eager to deliver the final Gnosis to Her Majesty. Finally, the Tsaritsa will have all seven Gnoses and their mission will be complete.

After a few minutes, the fireworks finally stopped and the Pyro Archon alerted the guards. But by the time anyone realized what had transpired, it was already too late.

The Harbingers were long gone.

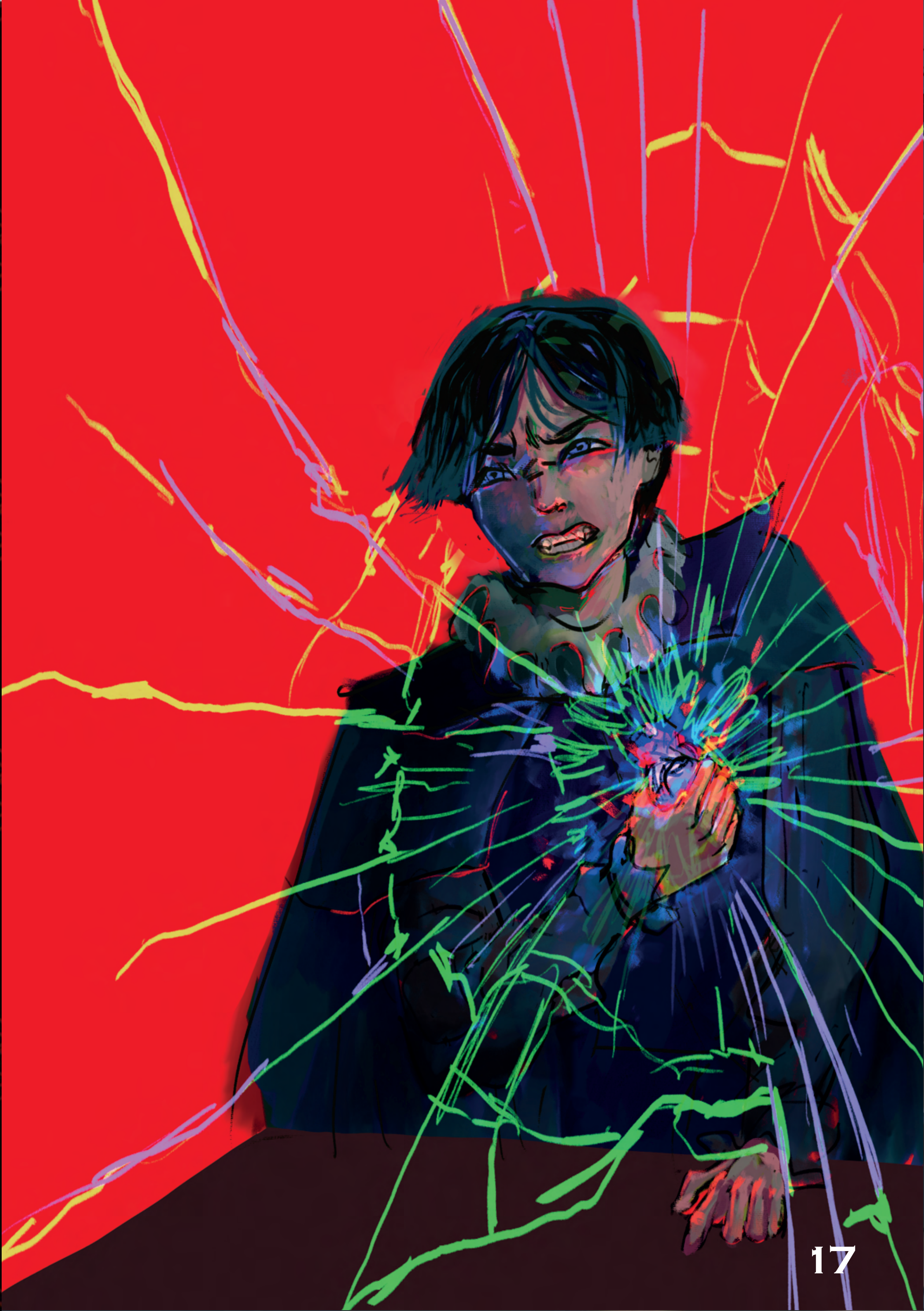
LIRA
MIC

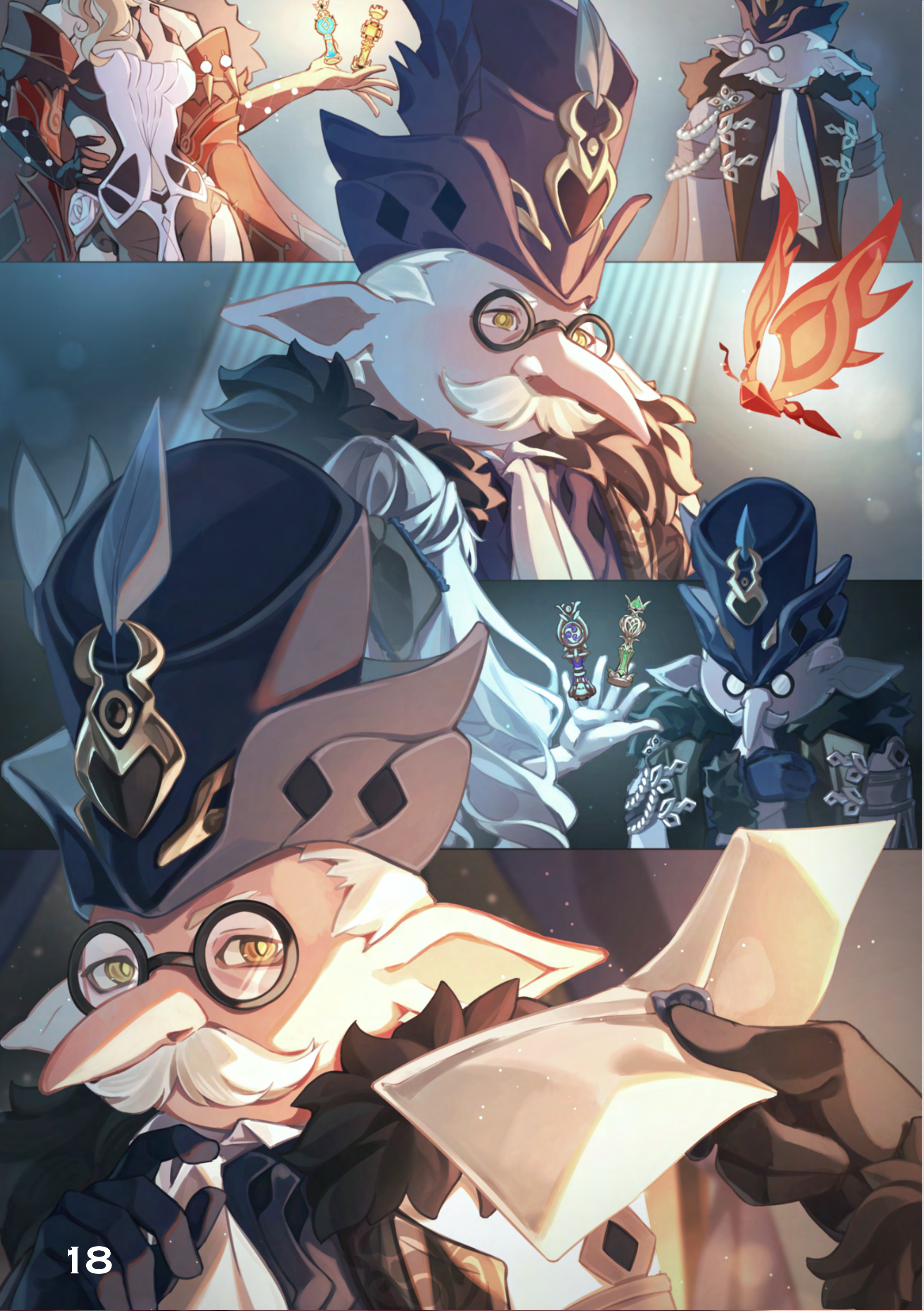
PICKING UP THE PIECES

by ISABELLA | | MoonWriter13

The glass had shattered long ago, only reflecting a distorted image of the permanent scowl edged on his face. His features were pensive, eyes constantly flashing with lingering irritation, as if everything was an annoyance and everyone was beneath him, unworthy of his time and attention... everything except the small item in his hands. Its soft violet glow was strangely warm and familiar, casting shadows over his fingertips and making his eyes flash with an otherworldly light. This item, so insignificant to anyone who could not understand its true value, represented his true calling, the one reason he had been brought into this world for. Yet instead of finding solace in the knowledge of his purpose, he was only met with pain, rejection and betrayal... Time and time again he gazed in the mirror, his expression growing increasingly sombre with each heartbreak he endured. His mother and creator first, his first friend and true family next, his own kind in the end... His heart steadily hardened, much like his expression, and cracks spread over the mirror's surface like spiderwebs inside an abandoned building.

Each emotion he buried underneath his arrogant facade represented yet another crack, another distortion of his reflection, another memory lost in the sea of time. From a lost wanderer to a Fatui Harbinger, the path to greatness was laid in thorns, leaving behind scars carefully hidden behind his constant discontent. But no matter how far he ran, how many missions he signed himself up for, or how many times he dodged certain death, the absence of the Gnosis never ceased to pain him. Nothing could make him forget and now that he finally had the object of his eternal desire clutched between his fingers, a part of him couldn't help but wonder... Did he truly deserve it? The person looking back at him through the mirror looked as far away from that naive puppet as one could get, the only thing they had in common being their heart's yearning for a greater purpose. Perhaps now, with the Gnosis close to his heart and a new goal to fulfill, he would finally be able to find a place to belong... and maybe, just maybe, a future that would be only his to shape.





ROOSTERS CROW

by SUN | 𝕏 | timeboros

The envelope in his fingers taunted him with every word, each pitiful sentence sending a nauseating wave of anger through his frame. The letter mocked him, spouted vile truths of his colleagues' stupidity, their inability to read obvious signs around them, and act in accord to preserve what little dignity Fatui had in the public eye. Though the mission was a success, harbingers returning with Gnosis in hand, their – his reputation – had been tainted once more. It was enough to make his stomach churn, face warm with the red of anger, breath shallow and tight. His hands shook, though he did not dare to tighten his grip on the letter, refusing to so much as crease the delicate piece of white paper.

Slowly, as if every movement caused him pain, Pulcinella lowered the letter, laying it flat on the desk. He ran his hand over it, smoothing it flush against the surface of the stained birchwood desk he sat behind, one, twice, three times until he was certain the crease would not curl the letter up. Fingers now freed of paper, his hands curled into fists, a slow breath being drawn through his nose as he tried to reason with himself, but the words on the page began to blur, forcing his eyes away from the paper and up to the wall across from him. There, in the center, sat a framed photo of his fellow Harbingers; once a reminder of the ambitions of Her Royal Highness the Tsaritsa, now a reminder of their failures. His jaw tightened, golden eyes narrowed to slits. Anger had finally taken its hold on him, sending the Rooster into a fit.

At once, the older man slammed his palms down against the surface of his desk, brows knitted together. The force against his arms pushed him from his chair, the smaller man leaning over his desk and staring down at the letter, lips drawn back in a snarl.

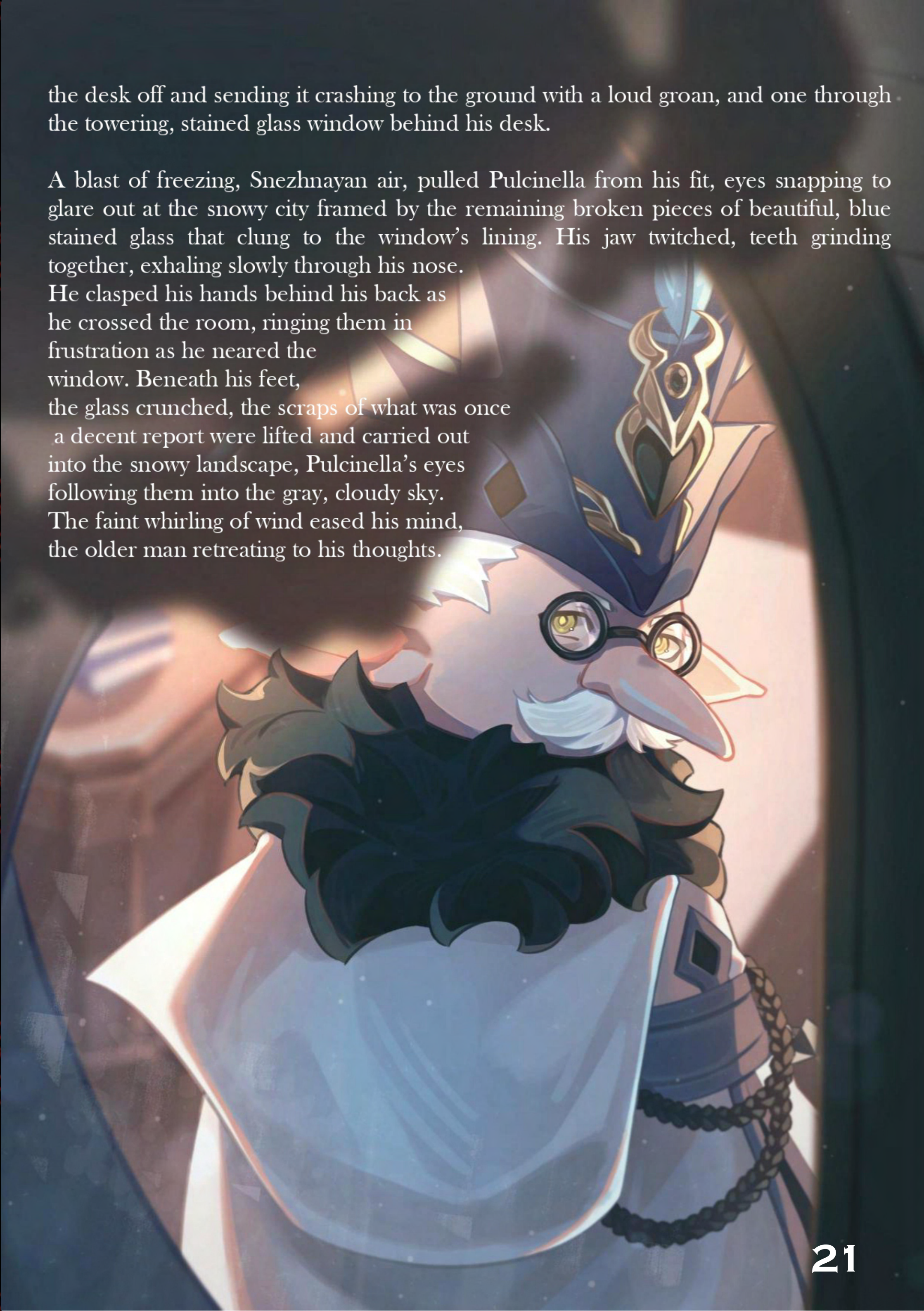
"*идиоты,*" He hissed, through clenched teeth, "All of them!" His hands lifted from the desk, swiping across the surface of it and sending paperwork, pens, and picture frames flying into the wall to his right. The glass of the picture frames shattered as it hit the wall, but Pulcinella could not find it in him to care, stalking from his desk to the wall he'd stared at moments before. The sight of them all, in their white coats, adorned with black feathers, made him sick, embarrassed to be associated with such imbeciles. His hands, lowered to his sides, flexed repeatedly, nails digging into his palms and making half-crescents in the soft skin.

"Look at them, sneering at us from that photo," The words sounded as if they were being forced from him, "They mock *us,* Your Highness. They make a fool of everything you've accomplished, and for *WHAT?!"* His hand shot from his sides, grabbing the silvery frame of the photograph and tearing it from the wall. It crashed to the ground with a loud crash, glass erupting from the frame and towards his feet. With little thought beyond the action, Pulcinella lifted his hands again and tore three more framed photos that circled the now vacant space and sent them crashing to the floor, adding to the spattering of glass that plagued the tile.

He turned on his heel quickly, sending the closest pieces of his destruction clattering across the floor and stalked back to his desk, not caring for the way glass crunched under his heel. When he arrived, he quickly plucked the letter from the desk and glared at it, as if it were responsible for every bout of misfortune that he'd fallen victim to and not the little ginger boy who, despite his years of training, was still incapable of making the correct decisions. The letter rippled in his hands, pulsating from his anger, and finally, he broke.

With a guttural snarl, Pulcinella released the paper, a small, teal tornado replacing where his hand had been, encompassing the paper. In seconds, confetti sized pieces of paper rained from the swirl of Anemo, falling unceremoniously to the floor to mix with the shards of glass. With a wave of his hand, the tornado collapsed in on itself, forming into a blade that shot forward, careening into Pulcinella's desk with a sickening crackle. The velocity of the wind had cut through the top layer of wood, shooting splitters upwards and ruining the careful craftsmanship of the object he had grown to love, the sight of which drove another stake of anger into the Rooster's heart. His hand lifted, teal blades forming at the tips of each of his fingers and extending outwards, filling the silence of his office with the sudden whipping of rushing air, before his fingers curled inwards, releasing the wind towards the furniture. At once, all five blades crashed into the wood, splintering it in multiple other areas – one through the top as before, cutting deeper into the wood, three into the base, throwing the structure of the desk off and sending it crashing to the ground with a loud groan, and one through the towering, stained glass window behind his desk.

A blast of freezing, Snezhnayan air, pulled Pulcinella from his fit, eyes snapping to glare out at the snowy city framed by the remaining broken pieces of beautiful, blue stained glass that clung to the window's lining. His jaw twitched, teeth grinding together, exhaling slowly through his nose.
He clasped his hands behind his back as he crossed the room, ringing them in frustration as he neared the window. Beneath his feet, the glass crunched, the scraps of what was once a decent report were lifted and carried out into the snowy landscape, Pulcinella's eyes following them into the gray, cloudy sky. The faint whirling of wind eased his mind, the older man retreating to his thoughts.



HOSHIYUET

by KESTREL |

Blessed creature. What would Celestia say if they saw you like this, with me?" Arlecchino murmured, swiping a clawed thumb underneath Columbina's eye, a soft kiss soon following.

"They would understand," Columbina breathed, "I will make them understand what you are to me." She leaned into her dance partner, wings fluttering in an attempt to get even closer, to press their bodies completely together. In another world, in a better world, Columbina would be able to step into Arlecchino's skin, to meld their bodies together and become one. But they were not in that better world.

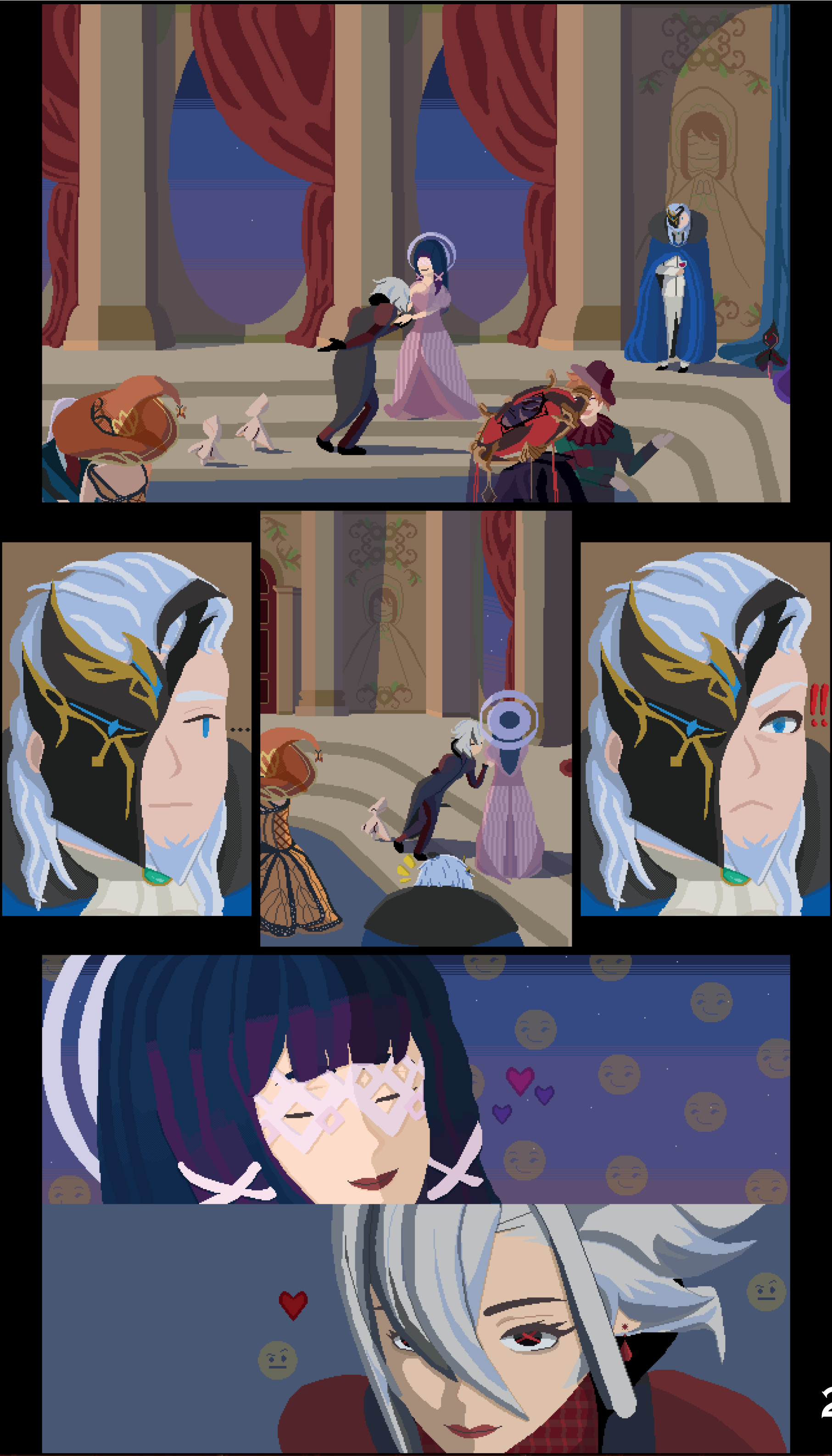
"My darling, you assume that they are willing to understand in the first place." Arlecchino shifted her hands on Columbina’s skin to better accommodate their proximity.

"If Celestia does not understand, then I shall reject their blessing." Columbina looked up at her partner, the sharp glint in her eye demonstrating the truth in her words. She would do anything for her love.

"Then you will fall. Little dove, falling hurts." Arlecchino's normally neutral tone broke, concern flooding her words. She slipped a hand into the soft feathers protruding from Columbina's back, caressing gently. It was both to support Columbina in their dance and a reminder of what Columbina had to lose. But it didn't matter.

"But you shall be there to pick up my pieces?" Columbina’s head tilted challengingly, almost daring Arlecchino to refute her. Arlecchino said nothing, only leading her into a dip.

The music slowed and floated to a stop, the two dancers breaking off their conversation at the silence in the room. Arlecchino bowed and kissed the top of Columbina's hand and Columbina knew she had her answer.



FIREWATER IN MY TONGUE

by ETTEEE | | etteee

Tense.

There was no other way to describe it.

Okay, maybe 'freezing' was a good adjective to add to the list, but if John admitted that, these rude Fatui soldiers would take it as an excuse to mock and insult the whole of Mondstadt. They were literally looking at his group with predatory eyes that looked like they wanted to eat the Knights alive, despite the strongest Knights being with them in the same room. They've been quietly (but not quite quietly enough) mocking the Knights and their too thick attire (apparently) in their conversations.

"How are they going to fight in that?"

"That's probably why their city is the weakest out of the seven nations. If they live one day in Snezhnaya, they'd all wither away in the snow."

John held his tongue back from mentioning they'd been here for more than a month by now.

This was a joke of a friendly banquet. What 'boosting morale'? Not to mention conversation – there was nary any sound of chairs grating on the floor. Nobody dared to even grab the jam despite how stale the bread they'd been served was. Some of them discussed – wordlessly; with their eyes – that the Fatui intentionally served them food that'd gone bad, but none of them voiced it out loud.

The only reason they were here was because a scout group ran into several Fatui soldiers, resulting in a tense situation where Capitano was eventually alerted of the situation alongside Varka. John didn't understand how a dinner was supposed to save their countries' relationship, especially since the latest events at Mondstadt with the Dragon of the East, but that was none of his business.

See, the biggest problem was their Grand Master. Varka, the Knight of Boreas of the Knights of Favonius, had many talents, but reining himself in was *not* one of them, and whenever he made trouble, the rest of the

Knights had to pay. In fact, sometimes John thought he did it on purpose to weed out weak people and unfortunately, John was very mediocre. He was an okay Knight back at home, but in this kind of freezing weather in a terrain he wasn't familiar with? Yeah, there was *no way*. Besides, this was the Fatui's home turf – even if Varka could defeat the Captain, the other Harbingers could easily come to his aid, not to mention the Tsaritsa herself. John didn't get paid enough for that, thank you.

It had been a long expedition, and currently it was looking to be nowhere near its end. John just wanted a break, but instead he got this stupid banquet where his heartbeat was racing due to his boss' tendencies to get into mischief.

Unfortunately, John wouldn't be lucky today.
The diplomatic silence was soon broken by the very man himself.

* * *

"Even with this thick clothing and in this harsh weather that I'm not used to, I'm sure I can defeat your captain! Ahahahaha!"

Varka's laugh was as large as the man himself, looking to be right at home at the enemy base, the Zapolyarny Palace's dining room. He ate merrily, only stopping to chug his Fire-Water, and now, apparently, to make stray jabs at Capitano. He seemingly didn't notice his own men's uneasiness, but Capitano saw it so clearly, how the whole room immediately tensed up for differing reasons. They looked at him, waiting for his reaction to this blatant offense.

The Captain furrowed his eyebrows, annoyed. He hadn't said a word the entire night and suddenly he was being insulted by this clown of a Grandmaster. Even within the Harbingers, no one dared to say a word against him, yet this man...

Somehow, it made Capitano a little baffled, unsure how to respond. He didn't want to stoop down to Varka's level, finding his whole demeanor distasteful, but staying quiet was akin to letting the insult slip. The more he thought about it, the more his resolve to keep things cordial faded. He couldn't allow his honor to be trampled, much less by these Mondstadtians who had never known struggle, who'd never known the cold, whose lands had been blessed by their peace-loving bastard of a *God.*

His Gnosis was in their hands, what was His people being so presumptuous for?

With each passing second, the rising heat in his stomach refused to be ignored and with a sneer, he finally succumbed: "Even in your homeland, with the weather and the land to your advantage, your people couldn't even defeat our number eighth and here you are in foreign land, thinking you could defeat the first?"

Varka was undeterred, waving his hand. "Those children, I can't fault them for not being ready, but me?" He laughed briefly – the sound, as always, was boisterous – and pointed at himself as if he was oh-so-powerful. "I can defeat you with less than ten punches."

Really, just how long had he been alive – Capitano thought in amazement at his stupidity – to think he could win againt an immortal?

"I only need five," he said nonchalantly in response, leaning back and downing his glass of Fire-Water.

"I only need one!"

Capitano coughed, half in surprise at the audacity of this fool and half in anger. "You said less than ten earlier," he pointed out, unable to stop his tone from sounding indignant.

"One is less than ten." Varka laughed again, the sound grating on Capitano's ears. For some reason, both the Knights and the Fatui have relaxed sometime during this conversation. Some of them snorted before covering it up. Capitano wondered if Varka even realized it in the midst of his loud bragging and munching. "I just said it that way so you can maintain your dignity," he added with an aura of superiority.

Capitano scoffed, but decided to not continue this farce. He had more important things to do tonight than carry on with this stupid lot. There were many things to prepare for their journey to Natlan and its endless ring of war. His army was not battle-hardened, still, and he would need to make sure they understood the consequences of their embarrassing actions tonight in their training.

He would drill it into their minds that it was beneath them.

There was no need to insult with words when they already had the advantage in the war.

BLOOD MONEY

by SUN | 𝕏 | timeboros

Pantalone's hand jerked down, the blade of his knife – a stonewash finish, gold bladed karambit, gifted to him by Il Dottore on the unification of their partnership all those many, many years ago – sliding deeply into the thigh of the man tied to the chair in before him. The thigh it was buried in jerked upwards and twitched vigorously in an attempt to remove the knife from his thigh, but nothing came from the movements, except probably more pain. The rope tied tightly around his leg serves to hold his leg in place efficiently enough, a knot Pantalone was almost willing to say he was proud of his soldiers for. When the jerking stopped, likely because his prey realized there was no escaping the burning pain of the blade dug deep into his muscles, Pantalone hummed lightly, biting the inside of his lower lip in thought.

A moment's hesitation was made up for, the blade got pushed forward slightly, the curved edge curling upwards and tearing into the man's tensed muscle. It was a bit difficult to hold the karambit steady while the muscles spasmed once more, but this wasn't Pantalone's first rodeo, so his grip didn't waver, gloved fingers tightly holding onto the handle. Through the bundle of fabric that serves as a gag, the man choked out a variety of strangled sounds, eyes squeezed shut tightly and head accompanying his body's panicked, pained thrashing. A snicker sounded, Pantalone's first finger dislodged from the golden ring at the end of the custom engraved bone handle, brows furrowed in a false expression of concern. He'd leave the blade there for now.

"Now, Jei Wei," The French man cooed, shaking his head with the click of his tongue. His gloved hand, sticky with the blood of his victim, lifted to card through the man's short, black hair. As it reached the curve of his skull, Pantalone's hand curled into a fist, yanking his head back to stare up at the 9th harbinger, who was practically hanging over him. When speaking to someone, he liked to be looked at. While he liked to see the pain, there was no doubt about that, he also liked to ensure that even when gagged, his victims understood what he was saying– the easiest way to guarantee this understanding was through their eyes.

"This all, truly, could have been avoided. You only had to pay what you *borrowed* from me," The feigned concern returned to Pantalone's voice, lips turning down into a pout, as if he was at all remorseful about the pain he had caused. He wasn't. Jei Wei's gaze, the guards who stood uncomfortably at the edge of the room, averted and white-knuckling the shafts of their weapons, and Pantalone himself all knew this, but it was part of the game he enjoyed to play with those who refused to pay what they owed; so it got ignored. The room remained quiet, no sound of objection from any party.

"But you didn't, and now we're here. Do you think I enjoy this? Do you think I *enjoy* seeing you in pain?" As if answering his own question, Pantalone's fingers curled around a piece of the sweaty, bloody black hair he held tightly in his palm and tugged it almost playfully.

"I would have liked avoiding this trip altogether, but–" Another click of his tongue, his head tipping to the side. "–you just *had* to be three weeks late." His free hand lowered to the knife, fingers dancing along the grip as if he couldn't decide whether he wanted to tear it free from the man's thigh or push it deeper. The decision came swiftly, Pantalone's hand wrapping around the messy handle and tearing it from his leg. Jei Wei writhed in pain, tears spilling from his clenched eyes. A bead of sweat followed, running across the man's temple. Pantalone didn't concern himself with the noises at all, nor the way he thrashed about, knowing good and well his men could tie a fairly decent knot. Instead, he marveled at the blood that clung to the blade, tilting the knife back and forth to catch the few gold splotches under the red in the dim light. His hand lifted, a finger swiping across the blade to draw a line in the blood.

"A little birdie told me you were planning to flee Liyue."

It's as if all air in the room is sucked out, a stillness filling the uncomfortable silence of the dimly lit room. Jei Wei's eyes focused on Pantalone, who had dropped his act in terror – more than they had been before. The faux expression of concern had been wiped from his face with that singular sentence, replaced by an uncomfortable neutral expression that stared down at him. Though Pantalone's face would give nothing away, there was a darkness in his purple eyes, a hostility his guards had seen only a handful of other times, one that sent shivers down the spines of the 9th's new recruits. Pantalone, though not very high in ranking, was not to be trifled with when it came to money. The man stepped forward, closing the distance between himself and Jei Wei, a malicious smile beginning to spread across his features. This was nothing like the charismatic one his business associates saw during their exchanges, much crueler and out of place on the harbinger's perfect face.

"You wouldn't do that to me, would you, Jei Wei? After everything I loaned you, you wouldn't just *leave* me?" Pantalone lowers himself into his lap, running his fingers down his chest, the glob of blood still stuck to the tip of his glove is smearing into the white undershirt, coloring the fabric a sickening red. His other hand lowered, the tip of his karambit pressed against the meaty area just above his kneecap, blade rocking back and forth in his hand. The man, still gagged and unable to answer, shook his head.

"No, no. Of course you wouldn't, because…?" The harbinger trailed off, waiting for the man to finish the sentence. Jei Wei tried, but the gag made most of his sentence come out as a garbled mess. An annoyed hum sounded from Pantalone, hand pulling away from his chest and fingering the gag from his mouth.

"N-n-no, no, no!" The man croaked, voice shaking with panic and adrenaline, "No, Pantalone, I w-wo-woul- wouldn't- wouldn't leave you- because–" He began to choke on his tears, much to the harbinger's annoyance. Pantalone dug the knife into his leg, positioning it behind his kneecap with a deep frown. Before any noise could leave the other, his hand lifted and covered his mouth, muffling it.

"Try again," Regrator hissed once he finished wailing, his hand moving from his lips.

"B-b-because you'd ff-fff-find me anyway," Jei Wei choked out, a dribble of saliva escaping from his lips and trailing down his chin. Pantalone nodded, a smile returning to his face. The blade of the knife was tugged back some, but not fully, still ghosting behind bone.

"Very good! Very, very good, Jei Wei! I *would* find you, and this–" Pantalone's hand motioned downwards in reference to their current situation, " –well, believe it or not, this would be much worse. So here's what we're going to do." The harbinger leaned back, toying with the ring of the knife as he spoke.

“You’re going to pay me the rest of how many mora you owe me – Zaitsev, *mon petit soldat,* how much is that?” Pantalone glanced over his shoulder, eyebrows raised at the armor-clad soldier standing silently next to the door.

“236 thousand mora, sir,” A gruff voice answered from behind them, a hand shifting uncomfortably along the length of his polearm.

“Yes, 236. Thank you, Zaitsev,” His attention returned to Jei Wei, “You’re going to pay the rest of the 236 thousand you owe me, and on top of that, because of this little trip and all of the unnecessary work you made me put in, an extra 40 thousand. Do you understand?” The man nodded painfully fast, though Pantalone could tell from the twitch of his brows that he didn’t like that deal much. *Too bad*, he thought, *Could have easily been avoided.* Nor was he in really any position to argue, what with the blade of the karambit buried in his Quadriceps tendon. He cupped the Liyueren man’s cheek, thumb gently swiping back and forth, a trail of pink following the movements.

“Good! I really am glad we could come to an agreement,” Pantalone’s eyes shut with a wide grin, the hand wrapped around the handle of his knife pushing it down, digging the curve of the karambit into the poor man’s knee. He tilted it back, pushing the blade forward hard, until a soft pop sounded from his leg. The man under him writhed, attempting to buck Pantalone in his lap, and screamed, head tilted back as a string of swears flooded from his mouth. Pantalone laughed coldly, patting his cheek once-twice, before removing the knife from his leg and himself from his lap. When he was planted on his feet once more, he readjusted his glasses.

“That–” He snarled, grinning down at the whimpering man who shook with pain, drool dripping from his parted lips. His head tipped forward to motion to the man’s leg, as if any indication needed to be given of what he was speaking of, “ –is a *reminder.* So you do not forget what you owe me, or try to run off anywhere.” His first finger slid into the hole at the end of the karambit, spinning it around absentmindedly.

“Zaitsev,” He hummed, turning to face the guard, “Be a darling and escort this man out. Oh, and clean this.” The spinning of his blade ceased, his finger sliding from the ring as he held it out to the agent. Hands freed, Regrator slid the bloodied gloves from his hands and dropped them to the floor, fishing a new pair from his pocket with a soft hum.

"You have until the end of next week, Jei Wei. If you don't have my mora by then..." He trailed off. He wouldn't leave the hidden room under the Northland Bank in Liyue alive. It went without saying. Pantalone sighed, throwing his hair over his shoulder and moving towards the door, Zaitsev bowing his head and moving to untie the man from his chair. Pantalone pushed the door open and called behind him, working the fresh pair of black, leather gloves down his palm.

"I'll see you soon!"

THE SUNLIGHT BEHIND MY EYES

by ETTEEE | etteee
Spot art by BRIOCHE | vanillamoontea

Moonlight slipped in between the curtains, creating a striped pattern on the floor. It was a little funny how they would open them during the ‘day’ and close them at ‘night’ when night was all they ever knew. Time was a construct in the form of a clock — a human invention that they believed wholeheartedly. There was only one in the whole kingdom, the one in the tower, and its ringing dictated the people’s schedule.

Sundials — and moondials — wouldn’t work here. The moon was a corpse that had been nailed onto their sky, never to move. In a way, it was a blessing: their little forest was never to be touched by the Night Mother. On the other hand, it left a longing, ignored yet slowly festering in the back of their minds, to see the light of day. Columbina was one of the people who couldn’t help wondering about these what-ifs when the ‘night’ was quiet, and lately, it had been much too quiet.

The Princess was out on a mission, and that left her with so few things to do. With so little energy burnt during the ‘day’, Columbina found her mind wandering at ‘night’. In the end, she decided to get up from her bed and re-sweep the floor in front of the maids’ rooms. That was when she heard it. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one wide awake at such a late hour.

“She’s only turned twenty yet she’s already going out to ‘get experience’,” a youthful girl said. Normally, that was a sentence that would be said out of respect and awe, but this one was said with a mocking tone. Columbina recognized it as Elise, one of her fellow maids who frequently spread rumors and gossip.

“We all know she’s just going out there to seduce that human,” someone scoffed. It was followed by laughter and snickers. They sounded excited that someone finally dared to say the insult directly. ‘Seduce’, what a dirty accusation. Columbina gripped her broom.

"Does she think everyone else is stupid? Daring to say she'd save the Moonlight Forest when we all know that she's—" The rest of the sentence was murmured, but Columbina could tell what she said: a human-lover.

Despite their responsibility as seelies to guide humans, most of their kind saw them as less than. Even though a human invention hung at the tallest tower of their forest, even though everyone here lived and breathed by it, they believed that humans were inherently evil, corrupting everything and everyone they came across. If you were a seelie, although you had to guide them, they mustn't get too close lest they profane you and rip your wings from your back.

Columbina knew better; the Princess had told her.

For as long as she could remember, Columbina had been serving under the Princess. They could even be called close friends despite the difference in their status. The Princess was very clever, unlike herself who was gullible. All Columbina knew was the dark of the night, but the Princess read about the light of day. Columbina couldn't read, and the Princess was the one who told her everything she knew.

The Princess told her that what all the other seelies'd said about the humans was mere slander, said out of jealousy because the humans could live in the dark, and their homes were shined upon by the sun. In whispers that were more mocking than afraid, they would even be called the Night Mother's children.

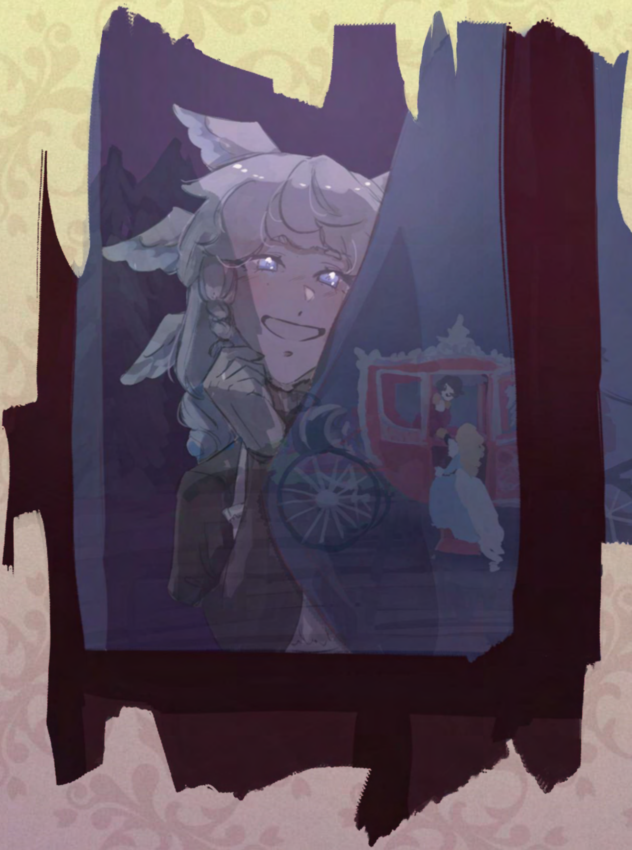
The Princess was kind, but the people didn't believe her. Whenever she tried to tell them about the humans, educate them about the truth, they would repay her with insults and accusations. 'Human-lover', they called her. Columbina didn't know what was so bad about loving them.

The rumors and gossip would only grow since then, but again, Columbina knew the truth. She knew the Princess. She wasn't the type of person who would abandon her people, and Columbina believed that those she considered her friends couldn't be bad people.

They all called the Princess a good-for-nothing brat who couldn't see past her privileges, they said she didn't understand the common people's adversity, but they also said the humans were evil. If one was wrong, why not the other?

Columbina was gullible; having lived in the forest her whole life, she knew there were a lot of things she didn't know, but the Princess wasn't like that. She was clever.

Although Columbina hadn't met a human before, she'd taken a peek into the carriage as the Princess was leaving with that man, and he'd looked very kind! The world was large. Even if there were some bad apples, she was sure not everyone was bad. Come what may, Columbina was sure that she would manage to solve any problem and come home safe. And when she did, Columbina would be ready to welcome her with a smile.



"And that's only if the prophecy is going to come true!" someone added, snapping her out of her reverie. "All this time, there's been no sign that it wasn't just mere hearsay."

"You're right," the rest agreed.

"Also—"

Columbina opened the door, pretending that she hadn't heard anything. "Elise, Marigold, the butler is calling for you."

They clammed up when they saw her. Whenever they gossiped about the Princess, her name would inevitably get mentioned: the Pale Princess and her loyal maidservant. Obviously, what she just said was a lie, but despite that, they could never do anything to her. She was the Princess' closest attendant.

The two mentioned immediately stood up. "Thank you, Columbina," they said, bowing their heads in her direction before passing her out the door.

* * *

Her head lies on top of the coffin as if she's waiting for Rosalyne's heart to start beating beneath the wood. The rest of the Fatui Harbingers have left, Arlecchino kissing her forehead before she closes the door.

Columbina smiles ruefully.

What a fool all of them had been. Herself, the Princess, the whole forest, and Rosalyne.

To think that they could change the outcome of a long-foretold prophecy, to think there was even a chance to save themselves.

Now she's here, the only one left of her kind who remains humanoid. Even then, long gone are her light-colored hair and bright blue eyes. The former has turned black like the night she is eternally cursed to live in. Even now, fate doesn't allow her to see the sun for her eyes have been shut close, and her tears have also dried, now coming out in the form of songs that she sings to fill the silence.

Now she's learned:

Humans and gods alike cannot be trusted, only the Tsaritsa—

Yes. Only the Tsaritsa can bring salvation to them all.

A LIFE IN PIECES
A FUTURE IN RUINS

by ISABELLA | w | MoonWriter13

Being known as the Nation of Freedom, Mondstadt is often associated with merriment, joviality and even a healthy dose of mayhem when a certain band of Knights decides to host one of their nationwide events. And yet, the stillness that dominates Mondstadt City at the moment does not seem to match the nation's reputation, the midday heat settling over the cobblestone streets and making the air feel almost stifling. Even while hidden away inside the comfort of the Goth Grand Hotel's most luxurious suite, only able to identify the disturbing quiet through the window, La Signora cannot help but sense the tension seeming to linger all around, as if the city itself is holding its breath. If she was more sentimental, she might have been tempted to argue that the city itself could sense the ominous fate about to befall its beloved Archon... but that was not her anymore. As far as she is concerned, she has been ordered by The Jester to stay out of sight to avoid rousing suspicions amidst the ranks of the Knights of Favonius. Even though the Fatui entered the city under the guise of conducting peaceful diplomatic talks to strengthen the relations between their homeland, Snezhnaya, and Mondstadt, their true aim has been far more important all along.

She would have volunteered for this task even if Her Majesty, the Tsaritsa, had not assigned it to her, wanting nothing more than to be the one to bring the axe down on that useless Archon's head. Patience had never been a virtue of hers and after spending weeks in quiet contemplation and stealthy surveillance, the promise of action had her blood burning with adrenaline. A few more hours and more than 500 years of sorrow will be avenged... Of course, the aim of the Tsaritsa is still her primary concern but the promise of fulfilling her own agenda is something no one can deny her. Everyone believes that upon being granted her Cryo Delusion following her recruitment by The Jester, she cast aside all memories of her past for the sake of embracing her new place in the world as a Fatui Harbinger... but some things are not meant to be forgotten. Certainly, her position amidst the Fatui has always been crucial, her propensity for infiltration and information extraction bringing her to the forefront of many successful operations. She would always tell herself that in her line of work, appearances are sometimes more important than substance, which was part of the reason for her constantly elaborate garb. Even in preparation for her confrontation with an Archon, she could not bring herself to forsake her imposing wardrobe. What is it that they say, that sometimes a woman's greatest strength is drawn from her appearance? In the past, she would have never lingered on such a saying but now... Oh, how easy it is to entrance and manipulate, impress and fool those shallow enough to be drawn in by her charming ways, her practised flirting, her underhanded tactics. It does make one wonder... How easy would it be for a woman such as herself to conquer the world? But for now, all she needs to do is conquer that Archon, that impudent rodent constantly scurrying around the streets of the city he was meant to rule.

On the bright side, her forced isolation inside this room has allowed her the time to ruminate and orchestrate the perfect plan. She had to change her tactics numerous times due to unforeseen parameters, the appearance of that mysterious Traveller that has taken to accompanying that lowly bard a danger she had to go the extra mile to neutralize. A few additional Fatui Agents and Cicin Mages would not go amiss, she might as well use all the resources available to her for such a mission. However, she had made it abundantly clear that the satisfaction of crushing that pathetic excuse for an Archon under her heel would only belong to her and may the Tsaritsa have mercy on anyone who would dare defy her orders...

Staring out into the city, gazing at the cobblestone streets, the picturesque buildings and the imposing walls in the distance, memories start to resurface against her will. How she wished she could rip that part of herself away... yet not even the liquid fire that she had surrendered her body to had managed to eradicate it. She ought to pull herself away from the window if just to force her mind to bury the vague images of her past that are starting to arise. Faint outlines, as if obscured by smoke, begin to form, her view of the present city fading as her memories unfold like a Kamera roll. Two figures, a smiling girl with golden locks and a serious man with onyx hair... Day and night, coming together for a brief moment, next to the fountain's free-flowing waters. A date, they had dubbed it, even if they had only been allowed a few fleeting moments together before he had been called back. She had treasured that time all the same, and when she had received word from him again, she had even temporarily abandoned her studies, much to her parents' astonishment. The wind carried their wishes that day as they stood side by side at the top of Mondstadt's tallest windmill, the whole city, the whole world, even, at their feet... So it seemed back then, as if the future was theirs to shape.

As the darkness seemed to crawl closer, they had allowed themselves the freedom of ignorance, the chance to build their own fantasy under the night sky, even if it would shatter at the first light of day. It was under the cover of the night that the two had met at the top of the walls, a cloak covering her golden curls as she rushed towards him. He was standing tall and proud, like the first time they met, and the way her heart had kicked inside her chest back then at the sight of him would always remain etched in the deepest confines of her mind. He welcomed her in his arms and the world melted away, their favorite fantasy building itself back up around them as their eyes locked. Only the stars above bore witness to the single kiss they shared, the first of many, they thought back then... Their only one, she now knows.

A few days later, the gates of the city laid open, the Mondstadt countryside spreading before her in all its glory. And yet, the only thing that mattered stood behind her, his figure slowly fading in the distance as she walked, further and further away from the city she had been born and raised in. The timepiece he had given her, the only gift she would ever receive from the man she had hoped would one day be her husband, was held tightly in her hand as she walked away, already counting the days until her return. However, nothing in the world could have prepared her for the devastation she would face once that day would come... The destruction of her once beloved nation was nothing when compared to the sheer agony that threatened to consume her at the news of his death, the timepiece she once treasured lying shattered at her feet. Her agonizing scream had pierced the silence and, on that day, she swore herself to vengeance, sacrificing everything she had once been and allowing the obliterating force of liquid fire to consume her. With her body dissolved and her face burned beyond recognition, she stopped being human and allowed the burning desire for revenge to melt any other thought away. Gone was the smiling girl with the golden curls that had longed for his touch, for his warm eyes, for his calming voice, and in her place, a being forged by rage and grief scoured the world, forever demanding justice.

Her thoughts don't go much further, the sudden sound of a knock coming from her door pulling her back to the present. Instantly, her eyes refocus, the images of the ruined city fading into nothingness as she turns to face the door and grant whoever lies beyond it entrance. As she does, a lone Fatui Agent pushes inside the grand room, his eyes nervously fleeting around before they land on her stern face. She raises an expectant eyebrow, pulling her immaculate coat closer as if to both shield her body and make herself appear more intimidating. The trick seems to work as the Fatui Agent's nervousness is almost tangible when he finally speaks up.

"Lady Harbinger, the one they call the Traveller and their flying companion have been spotted outside the Mondstadt Cathedral... and they are not alone. If you deem it so, then the time for action seems to have finally come."

She feels a sinister sort of joy rise inside her chest, the calculating glimmer in her eyes impossible to miss as the agent delivers his report. So he finally decided to return to the city and stop hiding himself away like a coward. All the better for her... He will soon come to regret that decision and if she has a say on the matter, the punishment for such a crime will be one worthy of the spineless fool that he is. She dismisses the agent with a nonchalant wave of her hand, pretending as if the news has not caused her long-forgotten rage to bubble up to the surface once again. The liquid fire burning in her blood only seems to roar in response, the desire to inflict the same level of agony on him that he inflicted on so many souls growing intense. She allows her gaze to travel back to the window for a few short moments, as if trying to commit the current image of her once beloved city to memory, before she spins around with a flourish. Pulling the door open, she allows the agents lined outside her room to lead the way to the Cathedral, the thought of imminent action enough to light her usually impassive eyes on fire. *I gave up everything I had and everything I was to get revenge, and all was for nothing... But now... Now, we meet again and I will enjoy watching you experience even an ounce of the suffering I have endured all these years...*

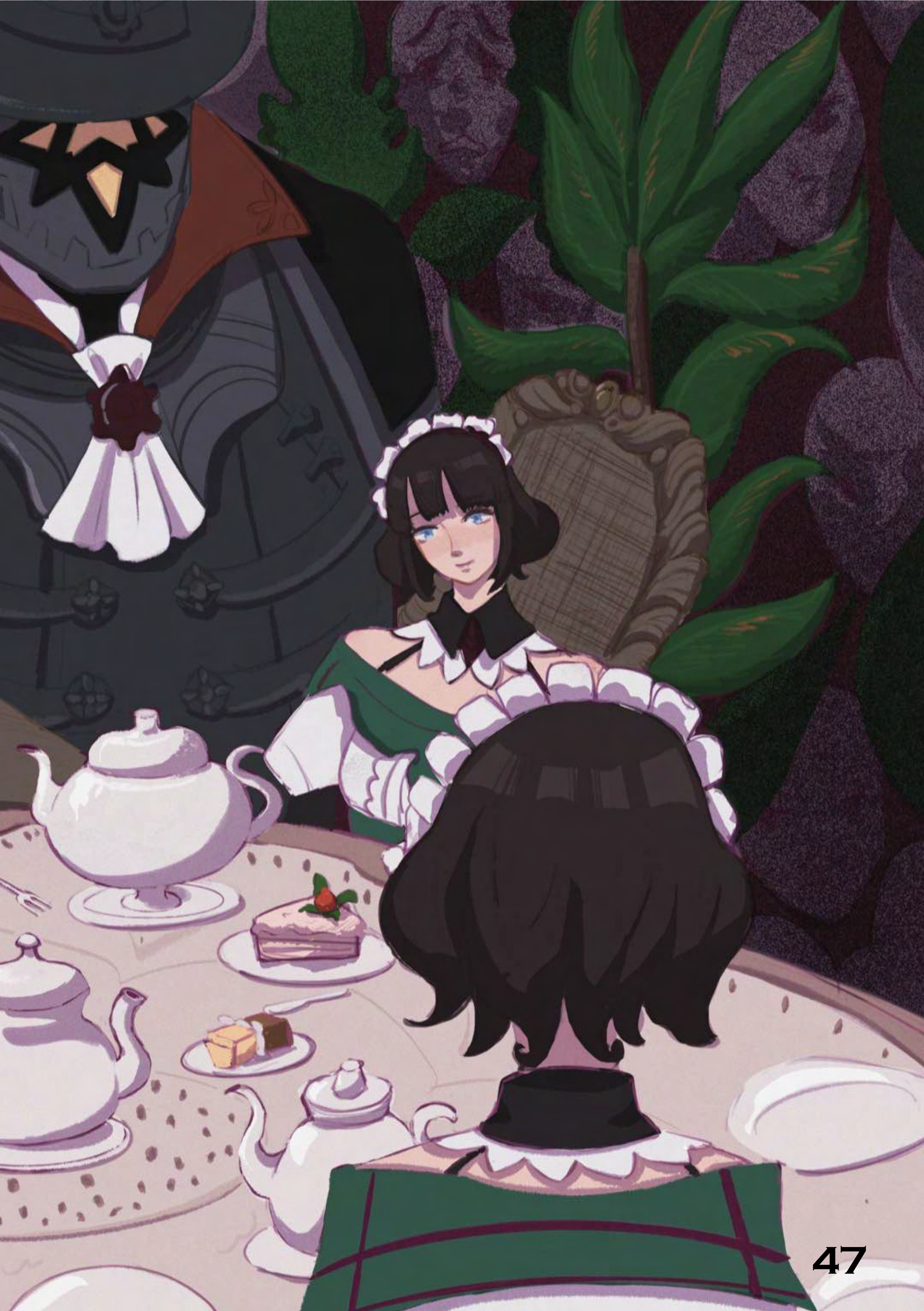
The mission was a tremendous success... not that it could have been any different with her in charge. No one had expected it, just as The Jester had wanted, and her executives had made sure to clear out any evidence of their presence there before they all departed. The memory of that rodent's expression when she first emerged brings a sadistic smile to her face as she lounges back inside her appointed carriage, already on her way back to Snezhnaya with the team of operatives she had brought together for this mission. The Gnosis rests between her fingers, her eyes scanning the offending piece, still alight with a soft teal glow. Is this what she had been labouring for since the moment she stepped foot in Mondstadt? In her eyes, it is a hideous piece, something to discard rather than cherish, but she was not chosen for this mission because of her opinions. She was chosen for her calculating ruthlessness and her meticulous planning, both of which granted her yet another success. And yet, the sight of her prize only seems to further aggravate her constantly simmering rage, its presence proof of the immense power that wretched Archon held and yet chose to never use it to aid *him.*

She enjoyed confronting him, at the very least. A mirthless chuckle slips past her ruby lips as she leans back against the cushions, crossing one leg over the other and allowing her mind to return to that moment... The moment she laid eyes on him outside the Cathedral. It took a minuscule part of her powers to incapacitate him, that formidable Traveller she had heard so much about ending up easily restrained by two of her agents. She had always expected Archons to be prideful beings, their divine status placing them above mere mortals such as herself, but this one... His insolence knew no bounds, even when she had easily outsmarted and overpowered him. He had shown no fear, to her distaste, as watching him cower and plead for his life would have amused her immensely. Her orders had been clear, retrieve the Gnosis and escape without being noticed but at that fatal moment, she couldn't help but briefly hesitate. She cursed herself for it but a tiny part of her could not help but rebel at the thought of inflicting harm on the Archon she used to pray to... But once their gazes locked, her mind instantly returned to *him,* as if it was impossible to keep him from haunting her mind. He must have looked much the same way moments before the end, always struggling against the inevitable, always so strong, so defiant, till his final breath. The thought blurred her vision, the lines between reality and fantasy briefly growing muddled as an image of Rostam, beaten and bruised and yet still yielding his sword with as much strength as he had left, flashed before her eyes. For a moment, it all felt so real that she almost reached out a hand to him... until that cursed Archon spoke up, an insult laced with contempt escaping his lips. Did he know, could he tell? She couldn't be sure at the time and her mind still refuses to decide on an answer. But at the sound of his voice, the mirage cleared and her fury surged to the surface like a tidal wave crashing against the beaten shore.

Power raced through her veins like it never had before, almost drowning her in its intensity as she poised herself for her final attack. A flurry of icicles preceded her strike, pushing her opponent further back before she surged forward like a vengeful Fury, striking him down with a single beam of condensed ice. He gasped, breath knocked out of his lungs by the force of her attack, and she revelled in the way he briefly trembled in her grip before she pulled back, Gnosis at hand, to let him crumble to the floor. A twisted sort of pride swelled in her chest at the sight, watching him struggle to steady himself as he rose to his knees... Oh how pathetic he looked now, the source of his connection to Celestia clutched firmly between her fingers while he breathed shakily on the ground, his whole body overcome with pained shudders. Yet even at his moment of defeat, he couldn’t resist delivering one last jab, one which he paid for dearly as her unceasing rage took control of her actions once more. Watching him finally fall at her feet, knocked unconscious, she exhaled heavily, her heart racing in her chest as she took a step back. There was nothing left for her there anymore and after ordering her operatives to handle the rest, she turned on her heel, not sparing the defeated Archon a second glance as she resolutely strolled away.

Shaken out of her thoughts by the carriage jolting on a sharp turn, she hides the Gnosis away again, dimming its familiar glow with a heavy sigh. Hesitating only for a moment, she allows herself one last glance at the city fading in the distance, the familiar sight growing smaller and smaller as the carriage speeds down the open path. It feels like yesterday when she had done much the same, turning back to gaze at her beloved home after surrendering herself to the burning embrace of the liquid fire that is now forever surging through her veins. Back then, she held nothing but sorrow and regret in her soul but even when the wound his death had left on her heart laid open and bleeding, her purpose had been clear. She had made a terrifying name for herself, first as the Crimson Witch of Flames and then as a Fatui Harbinger, only for her life to finally come full circle with her looking back at the same city she abandoned centuries ago. The difference is that now, she has no more regrets, no more sorrow and no more pain, the once open wound now an ugly scar. *After all these years, my purpose has been fulfilled... And I can finally dedicate myself to a new one.*

Turning back around, ripping her eyes from the sight of the fading city, her gaze instantly turns frigid as the memories return. *How easy it is, after all, for what you believe you have long buried to come rushing back to you at the most inopportune times...* As the sun sets in the distance, painting the carriage in hues of blood red and warm orange, a brief vision of Rostam leaving for the war rises to the forefront of her mind. His armour shone under the rays of the setting sun, his hair danced in the gentle breeze, and his trusted sword swayed at his side as he gifted his beloved city one last smile. He must have been sure of his victory, always optimistic till the very end, and yet that glance he took of his treasured hometown was bound to be his last. At least now, with her revenge on that shameful being who dares call himself Mondstadt's Archon completed, he can finally rest, and his soul can finally find the peace he never had the chance to experience. For a brief moment, however, her heart cannot help but squeeze painfully inside her chest, that same voice she has been trying to stifle for more than 500 years returning to torment her. Perhaps if she had been there, if her studies had not taken up so much of her time and her life, she could have done something to save him... or at the very least, she could have been a balsam on his tortured soul during his final moments. But all she had done was weep and mourn his loss, miles away from his final resting place and never able to rip the image of his serene, smiling face from her heart. But just as quickly as these thoughts emerge, she stifles them, refusing to allow herself to tread that same painful path again. She has done her part, she has enacted her revenge against the real culprit, the only one who held the power to save him from certain death yet easily turned a blind eye instead. Is that not what she had been striving to accomplish for centuries on end? It is finally time for her to lay her troubled soul to rest and disperse those dreadful memories for good. *In the end, they say that love conquers all... but in my case, it is only the thirst for revenge that kept me stubbornly going forward all these years. And now, I can finally lay my old life to rest. Never will I be his Rosa again. Goodbye, Rostam... and may we never meet again.*



OPERATION ETIQUETTE

by KESTREL |

Childe was extremely bored in his new room. All of the Harbingers were busy and Pulcinella had forbidden him from training with the other Fatui stationed around the Palace until he could “get a handle on himself”, whatever that meant.

So Childe was lying on the floor, staring up at the ceiling just itching to do something. The bed was too comfortable, the cold hard tiles of the floor reminded him of the Abyssal floor where he had slept for four months. His eyes glazed over and his vision blurred from pure boredom.

Just as the traces of Abyssal energy began to crowd at the edges of his vision, begging for an outlet, a knock sounded at the door.

Childe hopped up, a slightly crazed grin spreading across his face. *

Maybe it was someone to spar with! He practically bounced over to the door, ripping it open and startling the woman behind it.

Childe deflated, from a quick glance it was obvious the woman was one of Damselette's. *Definitely not a sparring partner then.* Damselette was fiercely protective of her underlings, for better or for worse. The woman, still shaking a little in fear, cleared her throat.

"Madame Columbina has requested your presence in her rooms." She squeaked out, hurrying away the instant she had gotten her sentence out.

Well, it is rude to keep someone waiting. Childe had no idea where Damselette's rooms were in the Palace, but it couldn't be that hard to find them, right?

It was very difficult, in fact. Childe had no idea where he was, let alone where he was supposed to be going. *Navigating the Abyss was so much easier than Zapolyarny Palace,* Childe groused to himself.

After what felt like an eternity, but in reality was probably only about 45 minutes, Childe turned a corner and immediately knew he was in the right place. Soft music poured out into the hallway, just on the wrong side of too sweet. *How unnerving.*

As Childe made his way to the only open door, the music got louder and louder with every step. Peeking into the door, his suspicions were confirmed as he saw Damselette sitting at a tea table, humming along to the music playing from a phonograph in the corner.

Cautiously, Childe stepped into the room. Almost immediately after he stepped through the door frame, Damselette opened her eyes, a slow smile stretching across her features as she noticed Childe. His entire body tensed up involuntarily, excitement and fear pulsing through his veins in equal parts as his body prepared for a fight.

"Come, sit down." Damselette cooed disarmingly. She patted the table in front of her that was stuffed with different kinds of food, sweets, and tea. Childe followed her order, confused as to why she had summoned him. But before he could voice that confusion,

"Good. The Tsaritsa has noticed your lack of, hmm, manners. She has decided that will not do." Childe's jaw set and he suppressed a growl from deep in his chest. *How dare she!* His mother had taught him manners. The only thing stopping him from snapping was Pulcinella's promise of letting him spar with the others and his mother's parting words so he pushed down the Abyssal bloodlust swelling up in his throat to the best of his ability.

"So I will be in charge of teaching you table etiquette." Damselette sat up, drawing her shoulders back to affix him with a soul-bearing stare.

"I know how to use utensils." Childe snarked back, feeling slighted. It's not like he was raised in a barn, though you wouldn't know it with how the rest of the Harbingers insulted him.

"Oh," Childe could see one of Damselette's eyebrows raise underneath her lace eye covering, "Please demonstrate then. All of the implements you need are on the table in front of you." And she placed her hands in her lap, somehow staring at him even more intensely than before.

Childe grabbed the first fork he saw, wrapping his fist around the handle before stabbing at the salad in front of him. He heard a slight sigh from the woman across from him.

"Stop." Damselette sighed out, "That's not how you use a fork." *That was absolutely how you use a fork! 'Just like you're trying to skewer an anmal', that's what Skirk said.*

"Yes, it is." Childe huffed, crossing his arms on his chest.

"Tartaglia, it looks like you are attempting to massacre the poor lettuce. This is how you hold a fork." Damselette then demonstrates holding a fork with a delicate grasp. In Childe's opinion, it looks just about to fall out of her fingers.

After a couple of bites, Damselette puts down the fork and gestures for him to try again. *This is stupid.* Childe would rather go back to doing nothing in his room instead of whatever this was.

After a couple of tries, the fork kept slipping out of his grasp, Childe successfully brought a piece of lettuce to his mouth.

"Okay, I did it. Can I leave now?" Was the first thing out of Childe's mouth once he swallowed the piece of lettuce, horrible feeling about her be damned. Damselette just smiled sharply in response.

"There are at least three more utensils that we need to go over. Plus finger foods, desserts, general table manners..." The faux innocent coo was back in her voice as she trailed off, index finger tracing the rim of a wine glass. There wasn't one in front of Childe.

The bloodlust swelled again at the thought of being stuck here for hours and, with his mind impaired, Childe briefly thought about lunging across the table. However, his mother's words, *'be good to them'*, echoed in his mind and calmed him down. *I can't let her down again.* He settled for gripping the fork in his hand so hard it cracked clean in two.

"Luckily for you, or maybe not," Damselette snickered quietly behind a delicately manicured hand, "We only have time for one more thing ." *Oh finally!* Although any delight that began spreading through Childe's body at the words immediately died at her next sentence.

"The Fair Lady and the Knave should be here soon for your next lesson, so the rest of our lesson will have to be taken another day." Damselette finished talking, with what seemed to be a permanent smile stuck on her perpetually glossy lips. Others may be fooled and assume that

Damselette is as oblivious and cute as her soft smile may suggest but Childe knew better; there was deadly venom hidden behind that sweet facade.

Damselette attempted to teach Childe about the different kinds of forks whilst they waited for the Knave and the Fair Lady to show up, much to Childe's chagrin. *There's no point! A fork is a fork, why does it matter if I don't use the right one for salad?*

By the time that Childe heard the clacking of heels down the hallway, Damselette had just about written him off as a lost cause, something she said directly to his face.

"You're going to take many more lessons in order to bring your etiquette up to par than I thought." Damselette gently sighed, her voice dripping with condescension. But he knew what she really meant.

"Come, boy, let's not make this any longer than it has to be." The sound of heels was replaced with the Fair Lady's stern voice emanating from the doorway. Childe briefly considered his chances of just running and hiding away from that woman when two voices that sounded like his master and his mother scolded him simultaneously. '*No disciple of mine will run from a fight'*, Skirk snapped, her words overlapping with his mother's last words to him, '*be good to them Ajax'.*

He had to make his master proud and grow strong enough to fight even her someday, so Childe just gritted his teeth and stood up. Besides it wouldn't do good to have the Jester or Pulcinella breathing down his neck if he attacked a fellow Harbinger, even if she did deserve it.

"Where are we going?" Childe was bored with the silence emanating from the older Harbingers, at least Damselette told him what was happening.

"It's none of your business where we are going, just follow." And just as Childe was gearing up to ask another question just to try to provoke the Fair Lady into a fight,

"The ballroom." The Knave, who had been silent the entire walk so far cut in, seemingly annoyed with the both of them. *The ballroom, what ballroom?* Childe didn't even know that the Palace had a ballroom. *Though,* he supposed, *it would make sense with all of the dignitaries and nobility that come to suck up to the Tsaritsa.*

Before too much longer, Childe was ushered into a gigantic desolate room by the Knave, the Fair Lady having left them behind a while ago.

Soft music began playing from somewhere in the room and the Fair Lady stepped out from behind one of the columns, her hands clasped in front of her and the same scowling expression on her face as usual.

"Today you will be learning the waltz. It should be one of the easiest dances for you to learn and should help with the other dances the Tsaritsa has deemed necessary for you to know." The Knave's words were completely neutral, the exact opposite to how the Fair Lady looked in the moment.

"Why are you both here then, if it's a partner dance?" Childe recalled the warm parts of his childhood, of his parents dancing in the kitchen while cooking, of swinging Tonia around once she was tall enough in an attempt to imitate them. There was no three person dance that he knew of, at least not one that was fancy enough to be danced in the Zapolyarny Palace.

"You are to learn both the leading and following steps for each dance, to accommodate your dance partner's needs." Childe wrinkled up his face at the Knave's words. Just as he was about to ask more questions, the Fair Lady cut in,

"Hurry up, boy, I do not have all day to waste on teaching you simple movements." She snapped. The Knave just sighed in response.

"I will be teaching you how to follow first, since it is easier."

The actual steps of the waltz were easy enough, but the instant that the Knave introduced herself as another person into the dance, Childe started having issues.

"You're doing it wrong." The Fair Lady called from the sidelines as Childe stepped the wrong way and bumped directly into the Knave for what felt like the thousandth time.

Patience gone and with an Abyssal bloodlust, Childe whirled around ready to attack her before he was stopped by the Knave's hand on his shoulder.

"We will come back to following later, how about you try leading now?"Although the Knave phrased it like a question, Childe understood that it was more of an order than a suggestion with how the Knave looked pointedly at the Fair Lady.

Reluctantly, the Fair Lady joined them on the dance floor and grabbed Childe's hands none too gently.

Childe was even worse at leading than he was at following. He kept forgetting which foot went where and the Fair Lady kept on getting frustrated at him and went the correct way, further messing up his steps.

Childe stepped to the right, not very confident that that was the correct step, and toppled right over the Fair Lady's foot. His vision swirled and the next thing he knew he was lying on the floor with the Fair Lady staring down at him disapprovingly.

"We're done for the day, I don't want to spend any more time on something useless." She announced and then walked out of the room, leaving Childe on the floor. *Ugh, I really hate that woman.*

Childe struggled to his feet, his head aching slightly, at least the fall seemed to have knocked some of the bloodlust out of him. He looked up to see the Knave was observing him from where she had been sitting while the Fair Lady was dancing with him.

"Pantalone will be waiting for you in his office" And the Knave rose and left the room through a different door than they had entered, the music shutting off shortly after she left Childe's line of sight.

This time he knew where he was going. Every Harbinger knew where Regrator's office was as he frequently called them in to discuss their expenses. *Could Regrator be calling me in for something I purchased or he is also teaching me lessons?* Childe hoped that it was just about expenses, Regrator could talk for hours about the smallest financial details and Childe had the suspicion that it would be even worse if he had more to talk about.

Childe knocked lightly on Regrator's office door and went in when he received an answer from the other side.

Regrator was smiling, the light of the smile not reaching his eyes. *Maybe not expenses then, he doesn't tend to smile when I mess something up.*

"The Tsaritsa has tasked me with teaching you the art of conversation." *Oh no.* Childe winced internally as he sat down, barely having the sense to keep it inside so he wouldn't get scolded and make the experience any longer than it had to be.

"Let's start with introductions and the beginning of conversations." As Regrator talked, Childe found himself zoning out, nodding every so often so it seemed like he was paying attention. The long lessons and being shuttled from room to room was catching up to him, exhaustion sweeping over him in waves. The day was somehow more tiring than days where he was training for eight hours straight.

Childe blinked sleepily, suddenly rapidly losing the battle to stay awake. He nodded off into dreamland, slouching into the comfortable couch he was sitting on.

* * *

Arlecchino had important things to attend to in the House of the Hearth, but the Tsaritsa had insisted that all of the Harbingers were required to attend the massive annual gala that had every Snezhnayan noble in attendance so she had sequestered herself in a corner.

Now Arlecchino could quietly go over her preparation for the children while also keeping an eye and an ear on the nobility flitting around the ballroom.

She had just refilled her glass and was settling into reading paperwork in the shadows of a pillar when a group of young noblewomen swept close to her hiding spot. She sighed. *Paperwork will have to wait, Harbinger duties come first,* she reminded herself.

The young ladies seemed to be in quite a tizzy, holding ornate fans up to their mouths in order to conceal their whispers, but Arlecchino had been trained in listening to others' conversations so she was able to hear everything.

"Did you see how Tartaglia held Elisaveta's waist during the waltz?" One in a particularly extravagant updo gushed to the group, eyes sparkling. Another one swooned, delicately fanning her face, "If only he would dance with me just one time, my life would be fulfilled." The others agreed. Arlecchino held her tongue, gossip about her youngest colleague was rampant but perhaps the conversation might turn into something worthwhile.

"And did you see how he effortlessly picked her up for the dip?" At another girl's sigh Arlecchino was suddenly transported a couple of years in the past, watching the kid trip over Signora's heels in the very same ballroom she was in now. The kid definitely improved over time.

"He's truly a gentleman, what family is he from?" Arlecchino was brought back to the conversation the girls were having at another girl piping up with a question.

"I heard that he's not a noble at all. That the Tsaritsa found him in a tiny village." One whispered conspiratorially, looking around as if she would be executed for her words.

"Well, he certainly doesn't act like it. His manners and stature are impeccable." The first one to talk challenged her friend, seeming to believe her friend was lying to her face.

"Maybe he was just a born noble in manners, just waiting for the Tsaritsa to notice his etiquette and take him to the palace." The group of girls seemed to love the fanciful idea, all chattering in agreement amongst themselves.

It was then that Arlecchino decided to leave the girls alone, there was no information they were conversing about that she didn't already know. She gathered up her paperwork and her wine glass, using the shadows to slip away from the girls without them knowing she was there in the first place.

Arlecchino chuckled to herself quietly as she walked out of the ballroom. *Tartaglia, a born noble? If only they knew how far from the truth they were.*

THE HEAVENS IN MY HAND

by ETTEEE | etteee

Damselette listened from the side: a conversation about a future that was soon to come.

“Smart, isn’t she?” Somehow, the tone sounded amused, but the woman was genuinely complimenting with an intrigued smile. Columbina could tell even without looking at her expression, knowing her companions all too well for the length of time they’d spent in each other’s company.

They were people united by one mission, one God, Her Royal Highness the Tsaritsa.

“The Traveler?” Pierro questioned.

“The Hydro Archon,” Arlecchino corrected. “To defy Celestia without any repercussions other than her divinity.”

Columbina understood her meaning. Just like them, Focalors had been a sinner. Yet despite her aggressions to the heavens, despite being named the victim of her nation’s prophecy, she managed to emerge victorious. It only took her five hundred years – what *wouldn’t* they give for sweet, sweet death and its relief?

“It’s good that she’s out of the picture.” Unfortunately, the rule “don’t speak ill of the dead” didn’t seem to apply to Pierro. Maybe it was because he knew more dead people than living ones.

Arlecchino held her chess piece, moved it forward to meet–

“Excited to meet the Traveler?”

It was a joke of a question: what kind of thing would excite an immortal – a human who’d lived far too long to even be called humane?

Arlecchino shook her head once – the sound a brief swish in Columbina’s ear – and clarified: “Intrigued.”

by ECLIPSE
seishun-emergency
chocororos_
Spot art by MELODY
melodyrealstone

All I meant to say is that Fontaine has been stable in recent years. The people are well off and the children lead happy, fulfilled lives.”

Neuvillette has never been one to much enjoy tea. He supposes the addition of unique flavors and various health benefits that the various teas can bring one is an appealing factor, but Neuvillette still thinks there is nothing better than a cool glass of water. Still, tea – in whatever flavor and with whatever benefits – is far preferred to the dry, crumbly pastries sitting atop the table in front of him, so Neuvillette takes another sip of the warm beverage as he sizes up the Fatui Harbinger in front of him.

Arlecchino smiles – but maybe it is incorrect to call it a smile, when it instead reminds Neuvillette of the way one bears their teeth before devouring a meal. He does not trust her.

“That is something worth truly cherishing,” Arlecchino continues steadily, “and no one wishes to disrupt such peace…”

No, he does not trust her at all.

“Now then. You have come regarding the matter of Childe, correct?” Neuvillette says. The edge in his voice is not obvious, but the slight widening of Arlecchino’s smile and the slight narrowing of her eyes seems to say otherwise.

“Well, yes…” Arlecchino admits. Despite Neuvillette’s swift dismissing of her pleasant fronts, she does not seem all that guilty about her obsequious small talk. “It appears the ever-busy Iudex Neuvillette doesn’t wish to waste time with diplomatic pleasantries and hopes that we can get straight to the point of our talk.”

Furina laughs nervously, highlighting why exactly Neuvillette finds her such a danger – her composure, her presentation, is almost too flawless. He can’t possibly trust a person hiding behind so many masks and twisting them all to fit her favorably.

Still, to back down would only be to show weakness, something that Neuvillette and Furina and Fontaine can neither afford nor wish to display. So Neuvillette steels himself for the game of chess that Arlecchino seems to have turned his office into, and prepares himself to play.

* * *

Father's office is dark when Lyney pulls back the heavy wooden doors and enters.

It's well into evening, and while Father doesn't care for some of the bright, obnoxious lighting that some newly-renovated areas that the Court of Fontaine opt for, she typically lights a few of the sconces scattered around the walls of her office. Today, however, the room is lit only by the fireplace crackling on the right side of the room, and the silvery moonlight streaming in through the windows.

Most of the windows in the room are closed, but the billowing of damask drapes draws Lyney's eyes to the window to the immediate right of Father's desk. She perches on the windowsill, back turned completely to the door, face obscured completely from Lyney's view.

"Please, Lyney, sit," Father says. Her voice fills the room strongly despite how she remains turned away from Lyney, speaking out into the cool Fontaine air.

Lyney steps forward wordlessly, taking a seat in the rightmost chair in front of Father's desk.

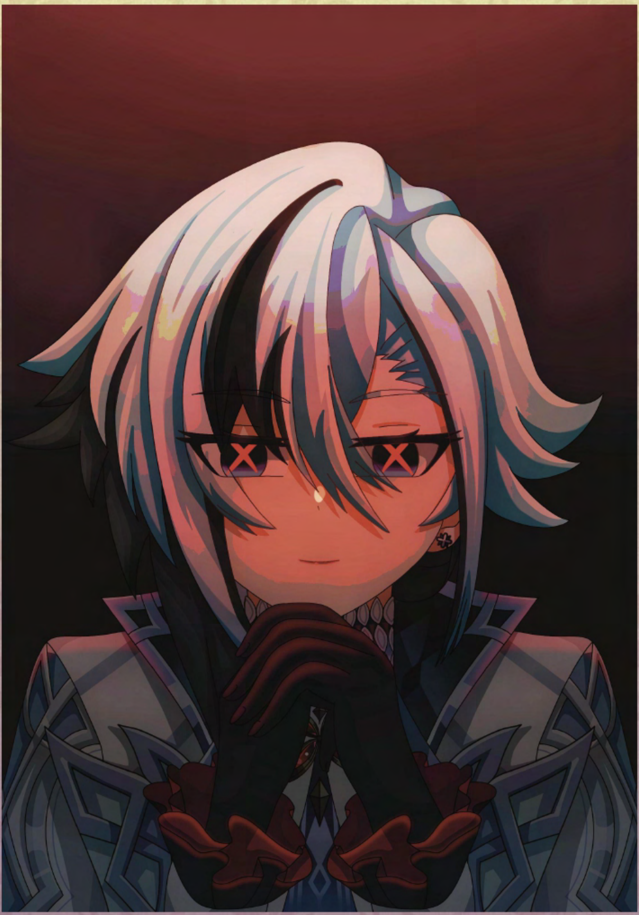
"You've done a lot of great work, Lyney," she says. "Despite the height of my expectations, you manage to meet them. No small feat, certainly."

"Thank you, Father," Lyney says. He knows from years of serving Arlecchino that the proper response is to be grateful, but not humble. A member of the House of Hearth does not need to be humble for all that they achieve in Father's name – Lyney knows this much.

Father's face turns towards Lyney, her face a mask of silver in the moonlight. Lyney thinks, for a moment, that he sees Father's eyes glint with "You know, Lyney," Father says. Her voice lilts the way it does when there is a hidden meaning to her words – now it is up to Lyney to find the trick.

"I do expect you to take over my position as head of the House of Hearth, eventually."

"An expectation that I am honored you have of me, Father," Lyney says. It *is* an honor. The House of Hearth is powerful, and being connected to the Fatui as one of their highest ranks is no small luxury.



Father's head tilts. It's a subtle thing, but Lyney has a magician's eyes – he is always looking for the trick, so that he can see and replicate the magic first. Perhaps that is why he catches it; Father's head has tilted farther than it usually does when she ponders or reflects.

Her eyes trace a path back towards Lyney, head unmoving despite its awkward angle. "One day, you will be head of the House," she says with a voice of nothing but cool steel, "and you will know exactly when that day is because you will have earned – no, *taken* – it from me with your own hands."

A chill rushes through Lyney, coupled with an understanding that washes through him like the cutting cold of the seafront air at night that the woman standing in front of him is not Father, not the head of the House of Hearth – but achingly, undeniably, Arlecchino the Knave, Fourth of the Fatui Harbingers.

"Do you understand, Lyney?" Father asks, snapping Lyney out of the invisible strings of a magician's backstage. Her voice is controlled, cool steel once more, and Lyney thinks he understands a bit better what she means when she says *take*. Her eyes bore into him, trapping Lyney in place with a gaze teetering just too close on the edge of insane. "Do you?"

Lyney nods. There is a lump in his throat that is making it hard to swallow. He understands better, now – the cost of becoming the Knave.

* * *

It's not often that Arlecchino finds her interest so personally piqued.

Still, the Traveller has been the talk of Teyvat for quite some time now. Lauded as a hero in more than half of the nations across Teyvat, with countless near-unbelievable exploits of fighting dragons and gods and archons. And there was that matter in Sumeru with Il Dottore – quite a few the Harbingers seem to show a unique fascination with the Traveller. It excites Arlecchino – their notoriety.

They seem confused when Arlecchino pulls them over after their tea party with Furina. Of course they would be – it *would* seem slightly out of character to them that Arlecchino would want to talk. But it's so rare that her interest stays this piqued.

She surveys them. They're quite clever, if the reports of their exploits from the children of the House says anything. The way they held their own during the conversation they both just walked away from is another credit to their intelligence. Still, Arlecchino can tell just by looking that the Traveller is one of those types like Freminet, that sweet child – those who would do anything for those that they cared about. Those with morals more steady and sure than the tall pillars surrounding the Opera Epiclese, than the mountains that withstand years and years of steady erosion. Still, just like a mountain – Arlecchino is certain that enough pressure would cause them to crumble. Not break – no, their morals stand much too sure for that. But crumble, degraded finally after years and years of wear, simply reaching a point where the weight of their conviction becomes too much to bear? Yes, that is how those sorts of people fall apart.

Arlecchino takes pride in knowing exactly what it would take for someone to fall apart in that desperate, crumbling way she likes.

She wants to know how far she can push him. She tells him about her suspicions regarding Furina's status as the Hydro Archon. She tells him about the attack.

Arlecchino tells the Traveller exactly how she tailed Furina. She was just looking for the Gnosis, you have to understand – and she was certain it was on the Hydro Archon's person. It makes sense to be – a Gnosis is tied quite closely to its Archon's powers, after all.

"And that's when she found the stray cat," Arlecchino says. "And she was so focused on her pursuit that she didn't notice me at all, can you believe it?"

The Traveller's expression becomes apprehensive. Arlecchino wants to push him further, so she does. (It's as simple as that, most times.)

"Left unguarded, I could only believe that she was meant to be bait of some kind," Arlecchino continues. The Traveller's expression shifts from apprehensive to offended, shocked that Arlecchino could think of Furina, the (supposed) Hydro Archon, as nothing more than bait. "And no one could blame me for taking the bait, of course. After all, from the moment it was attached to the hook, the bait is meant to be *sacrificed*."

Arlecchino watches as the Traveller's teeth grit, as Paimon's face clouds with shock and horror. Has she pushed them far enough? No, not yet.

"She was far weaker than I expected," Arlecchino says. "It was shocking, how all she could do to face her mysterious attacker was to cower and cry at her feet." It was sweet, glorious – Arlecchino hears echoes of Furina's cries in her mind and resists a smile. She cannot smile, not yet.

Her conversation partners seem stuck in place. Arlecchino smiles, and bids them farewell.

* * *

There is Peruere, and there is a beautiful building of glass and stone, and there is Mother.

From underneath a shattered pillar of stone, Peruere sees a wilted flower. A flower Mother would rather prune than cultivate. She does not want to be pruned. She does not want to be cultivated by Mother's hand. She does not want–

Metal flashes in the moonlight as Mother attacks, and attacks, and attacks. There are sharp stings against her skin, but Peruere does not care if she gets cut. She will not wilt here.

There is a symphony of shattering glass as Mother hits the roof of the building, a song most beautiful. Peruere watches as the building begins to crumble around her. She does not want to wilt here. She will not wilt here.

* * *

The night fills with bright, red light as a building just south of Mont Esus East shatters and explodes. It is certain that anyone inside would be unable to survive an explosion of that magnitude.

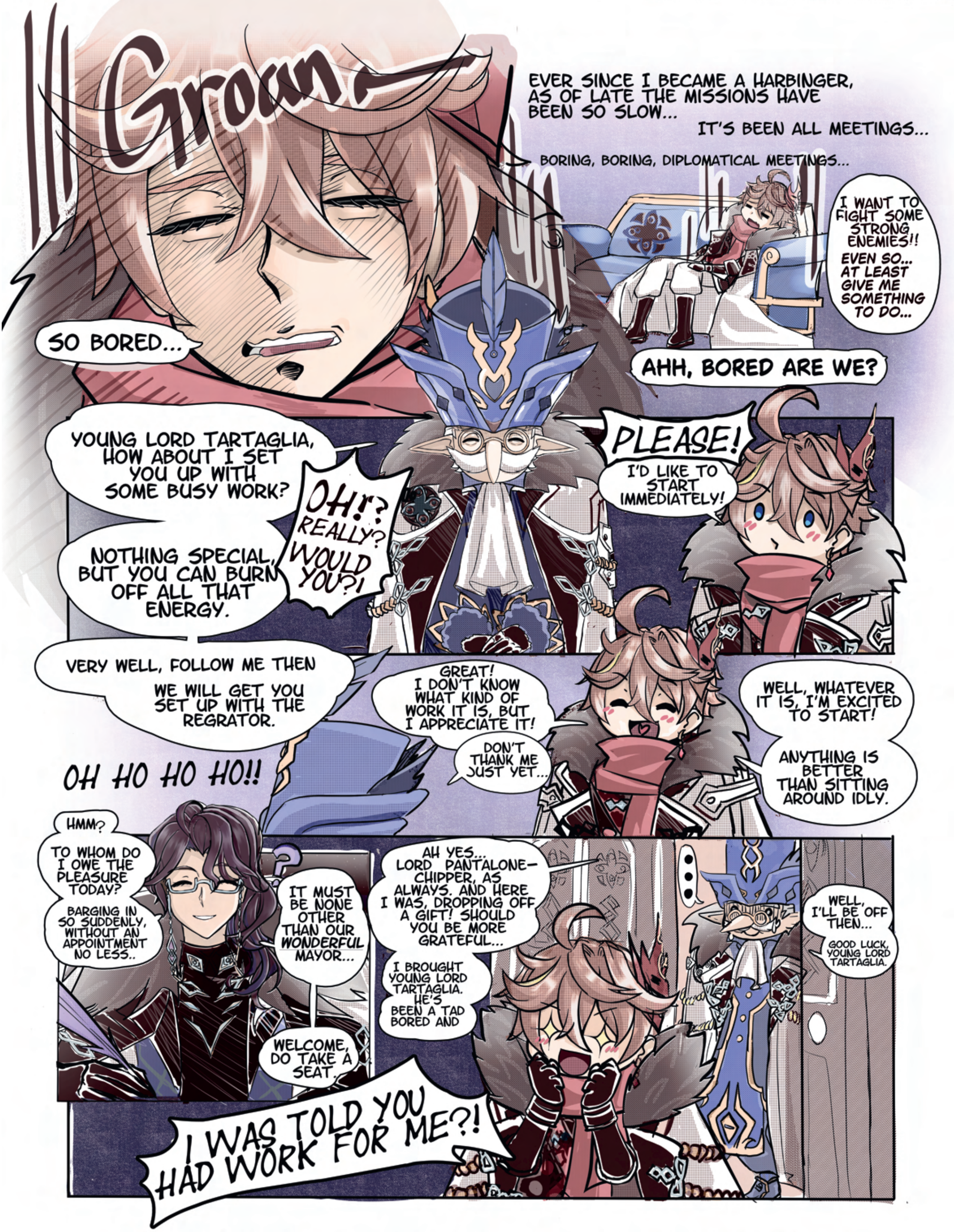
* * *

Arlecchino walks towards four people clad in the same white fur-trimmed coats she was given. A man's voice, deep and a bit gruff, rings out, echoing the decree of a god.

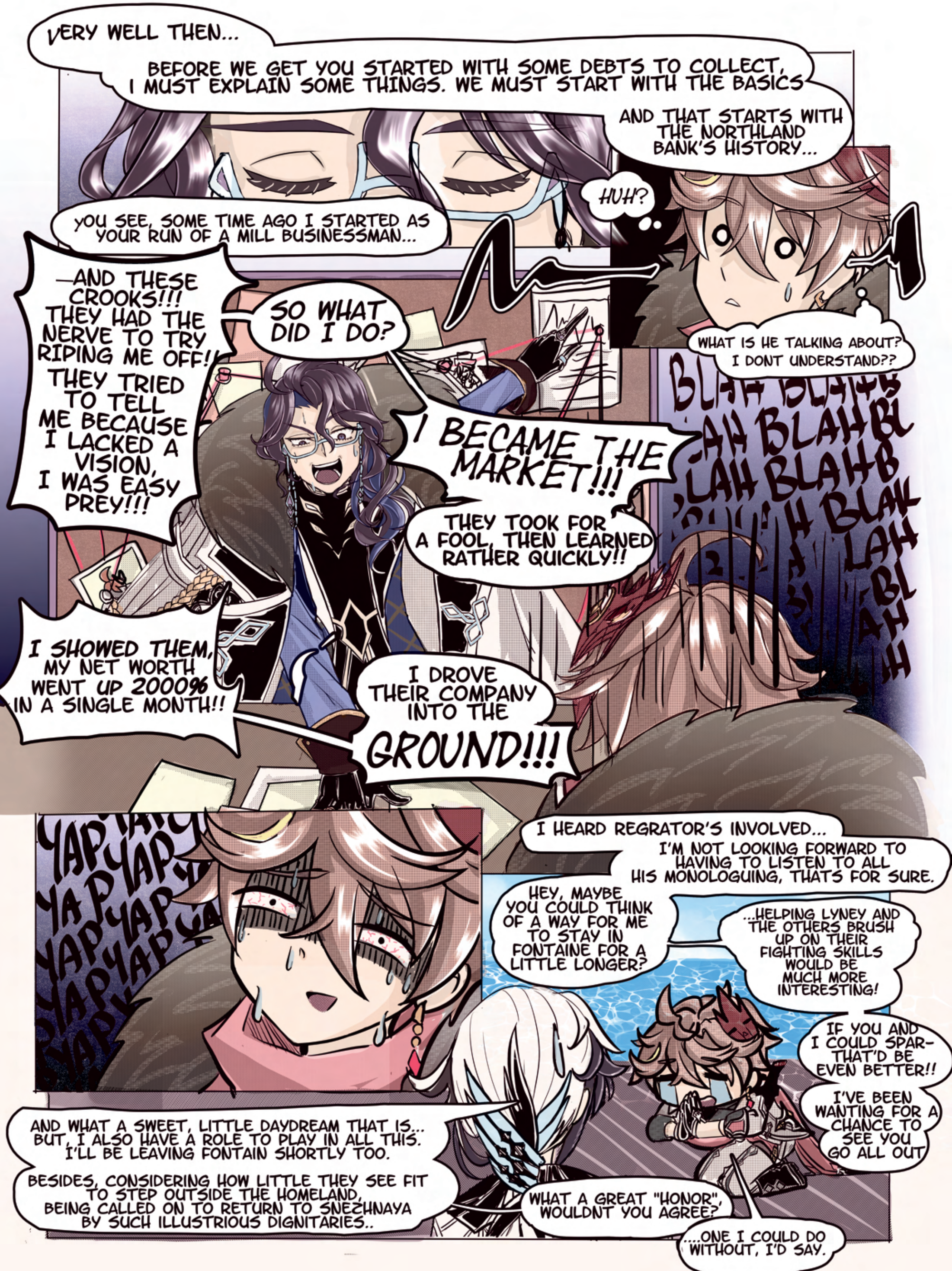
"I hereby pardon your crimes, and bestow upon you a new name."

Arlecchino raises her head. Behind the four figures, through the windows, she can just barely see those sparkling, colorful lights dancing through the sky.

"This title and its legacy of bloodshed are now yours to bear, my poor, mad, cursed Knave."


Groan
EVER SINCE I BECAME A HARBINGER, AS OF LATE THE MISSIONS HAVE BEEN SO SLOW...
IT'S BEEN ALL MEETINGS...
BORING, BORING, DIPLOMATICAL MEETINGS...
I WANT TO FIGHT SOME STRONG ENEMIES!!
EVEN SO... AT LEAST GIVE ME SOMETHING TO DO...
SO BORED...
AHH, BORED ARE WE?
YOUNG LORD TARTAGLIA, HOW ABOUT I SET YOU UP WITH SOME BUSY WORK?
NOTHING SPECIAL, BUT YOU CAN BURN OFF ALL THAT ENERGY.
OH!? REALLY? WOULD YOU?!
PLEASE!
I'D LIKE TO START IMMEDIATELY!
VERY WELL, FOLLOW ME THEN
WE WILL GET YOU SET UP WITH THE REGRATOR.
OH HO HO HO!!
GREAT! I DON'T KNOW WHAT KIND OF WORK IT IS, BUT I APPRECIATE IT!
DON'T THANK ME JUST YET...
WELL, WHATEVER IT IS, I'M EXCITED TO START!
ANYTHING IS BETTER THAN SITTING AROUND IDLY.
HMM?
TO WHOM DO I OWE THE PLEASURE TODAY?
BARGING IN SO SUDDENLY, WITHOUT AN APPOINTMENT NO LESS..
IT MUST BE NONE OTHER THAN OUR WONDERFUL MAYOR...
WELCOME, DO TAKE A SEAT.
AH YES... LORD PANTALONE-CHIPPER, AS ALWAYS. AND HERE I WAS, DROPPING OFF A GIFT! SHOULD YOU BE MORE GRATEFUL...
I BROUGHT YOUNG LORD TARTAGLIA. HE'S BEEN A TAD BORED AND
...
WELL, I'LL BE OFF THEN...
GOOD LUCK, YOUNG LORD TARTAGLIA.
I WAS TOLD YOU HAD WORK FOR ME?!

AH YES, I SUPPOSE I DID HAVE NEED FOR ANOTHER DEBT COLLECTOR...


VERY WELL THEN...
BEFORE WE GET YOU STARTED WITH SOME DEBTS TO COLLECT, I MUST EXPLAIN SOME THINGS. WE MUST START WITH THE BASICS
AND THAT STARTS WITH THE NORTHLAND BANK'S HISTORY...
HUH?
YOU SEE, SOME TIME AGO I STARTED AS YOUR RUN OF A MILL BUSINESSMAN...
WHAT IS HE TALKING ABOUT? I DONT UNDERSTAND??
—AND THESE CROOKS!!! THEY HAD THE NERVE TO TRY RIPING ME OFF!! THEY TRIED TO TELL ME BECAUSE I LACKED A VISION, I WAS EASY PREY!!!
SO WHAT DID I DO?
I BECAME THE MARKET!!!
THEY TOOK FOR A FOOL, THEN LEARNED RATHER QUICKLY!!
BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH
I SHOWED THEM, MY NET WORTH WENT UP 2000% IN A SINGLE MONTH!!
I DROVE THEIR COMPANY INTO THE GROUND!!!
YAP YAP YAP YAP YAP YAP YAP YAP YAP YAP
I HEARD REGRATOR'S INVOLVED...
I'M NOT LOOKING FORWARD TO HAVING TO LISTEN TO ALL HIS MONOLOGUING, THATS FOR SURE.
HEY, MAYBE YOU COULD THINK OF A WAY FOR ME TO STAY IN FONTAINE FOR A LITTLE LONGER?
...HELPING LYNEY AND THE OTHERS BRUSH UP ON THEIR FIGHTING SKILLS WOULD BE MUCH MORE INTERESTING!
IF YOU AND I COULD SPAR- THAT'D BE EVEN BETTER!!
I'VE BEEN WANTING FOR A CHANCE TO SEE YOU GO ALL OUT
AND WHAT A SWEET, LITTLE DAYDREAM THAT IS... BUT, I ALSO HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN ALL THIS. I'LL BE LEAVING FONTAIN SHORTLY TOO.
BESIDES, CONSIDERING HOW LITTLE THEY SEE FIT TO STEP OUTSIDE THE HOMELAND, BEING CALLED ON TO RETURN TO SNEZHNAYA BY SUCH ILLUSTRIOUS DIGNITARIES..
WHAT A GREAT "HONOR", WOULDNT YOU AGREE?
...ONE I COULD DO WITHOUT, I'D SAY.

MY SALVATION YOUR DOOM

by ISABELLA | MoonWriter13

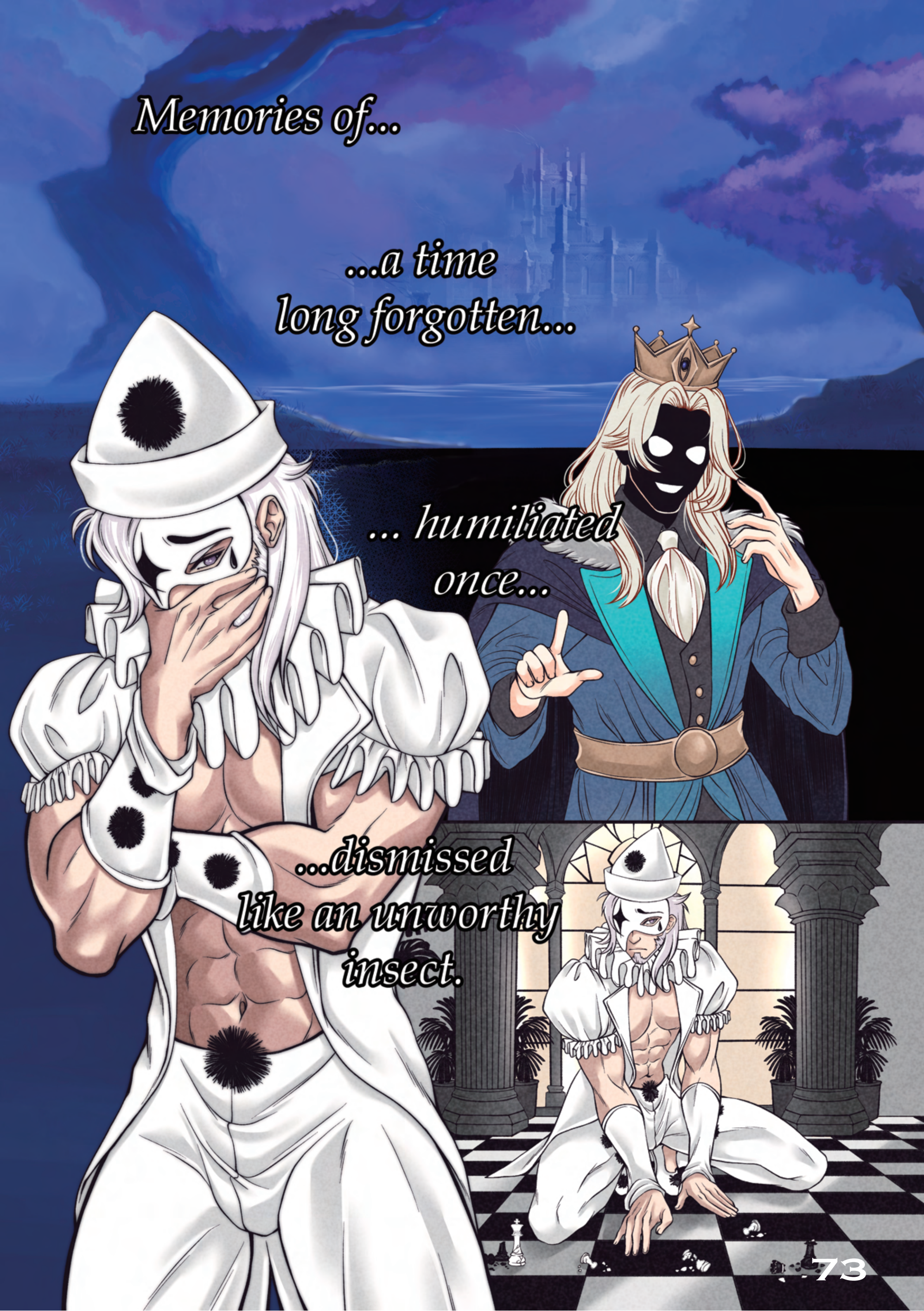
Absolute peace... That was the only thing he had asked for today. A day of mourning is meant to be spent in silent contemplation, both to give the soul time to face the loss properly and to give the mind time to orchestrate its revenge. As the Director of the Fatui, Pierro had much less time to allot to the former as the latter reared its ugly head, demanding attention. Besides, wasn't his ability to separate himself from pain and sorrow while still using them to fuel his actions one of the reasons he had found himself holding such a coveted position? Perhaps some of the most prominent figures of his past life would rise in protest at such a notion but were they not inconsequential to him and his cause after all these years? In that regard, he had already had his revenge... While they suffered untold agony during their final moments and perished at the hands of the same divine wrath their sinful actions had evoked, he rose above, even though he still could not escape the curse. Those of pure blood were meant to suffer even for a crime they did not commit but as the centuries passed him by, Pierro came to care less about the lingering vestiges of his affliction, letting it fade into the background of his mind much like the memories of his life within the now eradicated nation of Khaenri’ah.

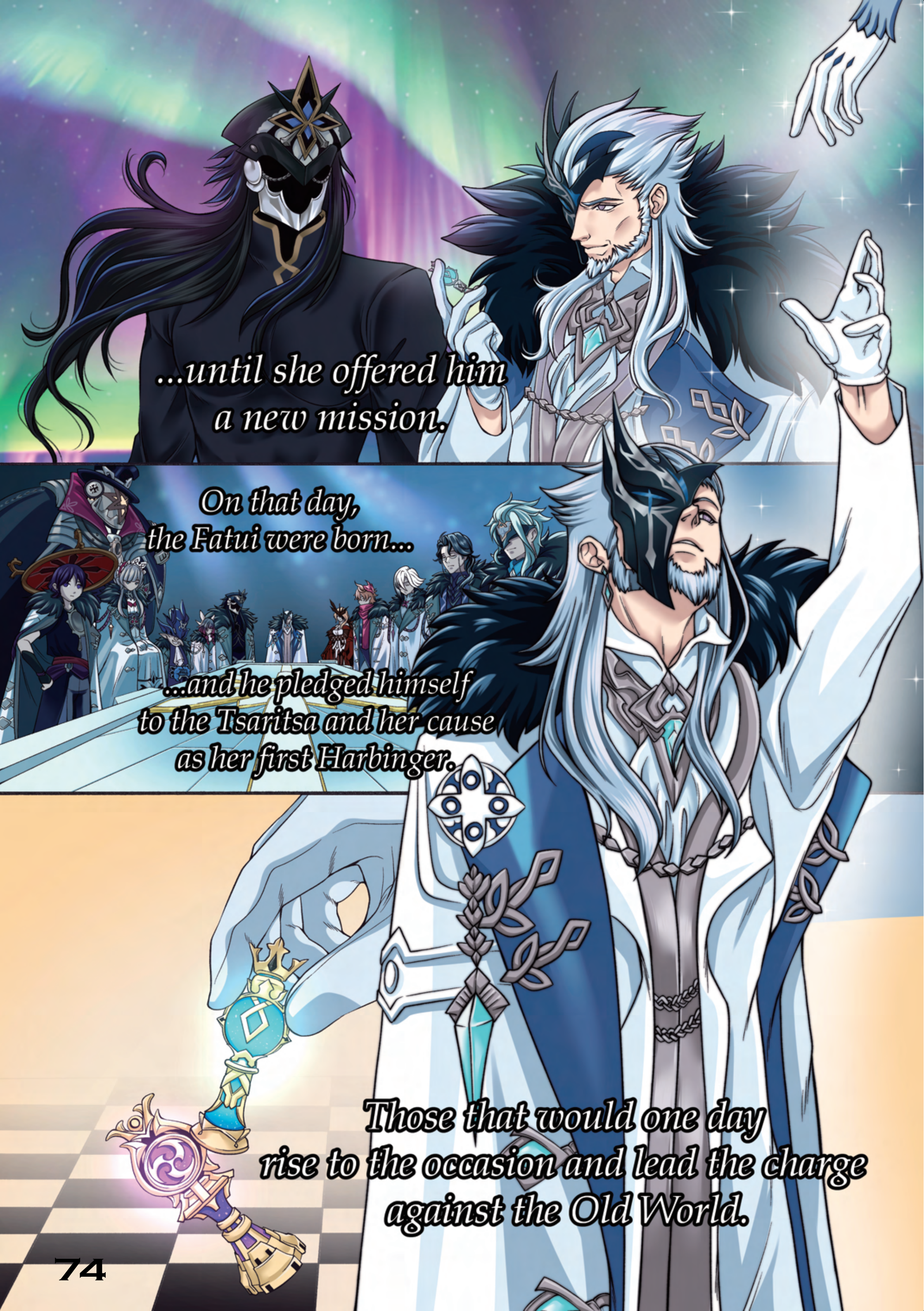
Khaenri’ah... Why had that part of him emerged from the shadows at a time like this? Perhaps it was the recent passing of La Signora, her body now encased in a coffin of ice placed within the grand hall of Zapolyarny Palace for all to pay their respects to... or perhaps it was the sight of the incomplete chessboard before him, already holding two of the Gnoses they had been tasked with hunting and retrieving by Her Majesty, the Tsaritsa. He idly moved a piece, watching as it conquered another, letting it topple to the checkered board like a soldier falling in battle. That was how easy it had been for the Raiden Shogun to cut the strings of Rosalyne’s life, letting her crumble to the floor, lifeless, much like this inanimate pawn he so easily defeated. The gods always viewed them as nothing but disposable pawns, after all, subject to their whims and fancies... They even took it upon themselves to humour them by granting some of them Visions, a rare spark of hope in an otherwise cruel world. But the time when he had grovelled at the feet of both gods and kings has long since passed and if that wretched King Irmin could see him now, he would be the one bowing at his feet and begging for a forgiveness that would never come.

He leaned back in his chair, his eyes gazing into the distance as they clouded over, memories of a time long forgotten rising to the forefront of his mind. He had been humiliated, once... Ridiculed and dismissed like an unworthy insect crawling at the feet of those the King considered wise and capable. He had tried oh so hard to earn his favour, to prove that his position as a royal mage was more of a stepping stone to greatness rather than a permanent position... but he had failed. Time and time again the King refused to grant him his favour, always insisting that his nation's sages were far better suited for accomplishing the goals he had been desperately seeking to pursue himself. The *sad clown,* always pushed to the sidelines, ignored and laughed at when he would warn them all of the nation's imminent demise. In the end, it was those sinful sages King Irmin had so blindly trusted that tore away the veil of sin, dooming them all to suffer a fate worse than death. The final moments of his home are still etched in the deepest confines of his mind, a mixture of both agony and righteous anger racing through his veins at the memory. He had been right, all along... The destruction laid upon them by the wrath of the gods had been foretold only by him and as the end came, he could only spare a sardonic laugh for the agony of those impudent fools before he escaped.

In the aftermath of that destruction, he had lost everything... His place in the world, his values, his faith in a better tomorrow, his future prospects. He had wandered for some time, attempting to alleviate the burden of the curse already weighing heavily on his mind, until *she* offered him a new mission. The Tsaritsa, bless Her Majesty's benevolence and vision, seemed to easily understand and share his bitterness towards the very structure of this world, towards the gods that he had come to loathe with every fibre of his being following the fall of Khaenri'ah. She offered him a chance to right the wrongs of this world, to aid her in opening a path to a new world that would no longer be relying on those same foundations he so vehemently despised... and he took it. She granted him absolute power, freedom of movement and choice, and free reign to do with it as he pleased. On that day, the Fatui were born and he pledged himself to the Tsaritsa and her cause as her first Harbinger.

Following his pledge, he had taken it upon himself to recruit many equally tortured and willing souls to the Tsaritsa's cause. Zandik, now better known as Il Dottore, was easily recruited once he was granted permission to continue his experiments and pursue his ultimate heretic goal, the creation of an artificial goal. Rosalyne, whose life was so abruptly cut short, was harder to convince, her vengeful spirit unyielding up until he promised her a new beginning and the chance to tame the roaring flames that had all but consumed her completely at that point. Capitano's recruitment had required a different approach, the promise of power and friendship being what ultimately swayed his righteous heart. Years and years he spent, recruiting those he deemed worthy, those that would one day rise to the occasion and lead the charge against the Old World. Even if one of those had already sacrificed herself for the cause, it was his duty to hold the rest together, both to continue pursuing their mission and to avenge the untimely death of their respected comrade. And as he rose from his seat, leaving his prophetic chessboard and the glowing Gnoses behind, the hallways echoed with the sound of his purposeful steps as he made his way to the grand hall. And as he stood above the coffin that held her body, the rest of the Harbingers flanking him on both sides, he couldn't help but direct one last wish her way, one last hope for her soul to find peace under the comforting blanket of snow. *Farewell, Rosalyne, and may you finally find in death the peace your soul could never find in life...*


Memories of...
...a time long forgotten...
... humiliated once...
...dismissed like an unworthy insect.


...until she offered him a new mission.
On that day, the Fatui were born...
...and he pledged himself to the Tsaritsa and her cause as her first Harbinger.
Those that would one day rise to the occasion and lead the charge against the Old World.

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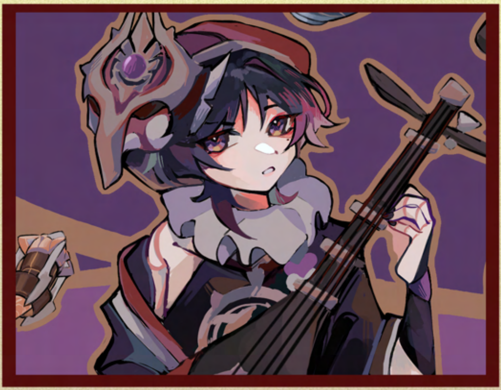

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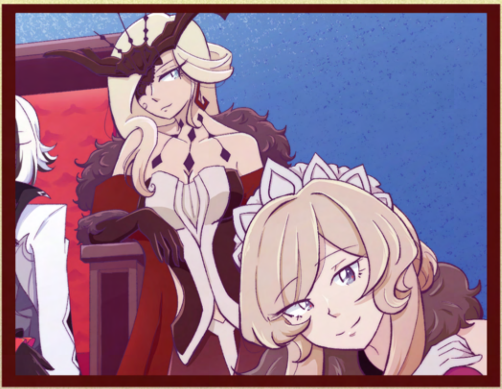

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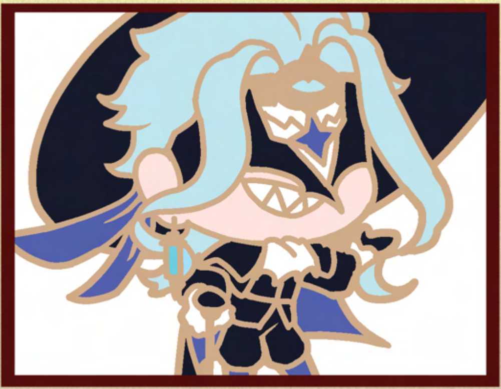

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	t	helixcraft

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MELODY	◎ 𝕏	melodyrealstone

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	𝕏	LookimaGhostArt

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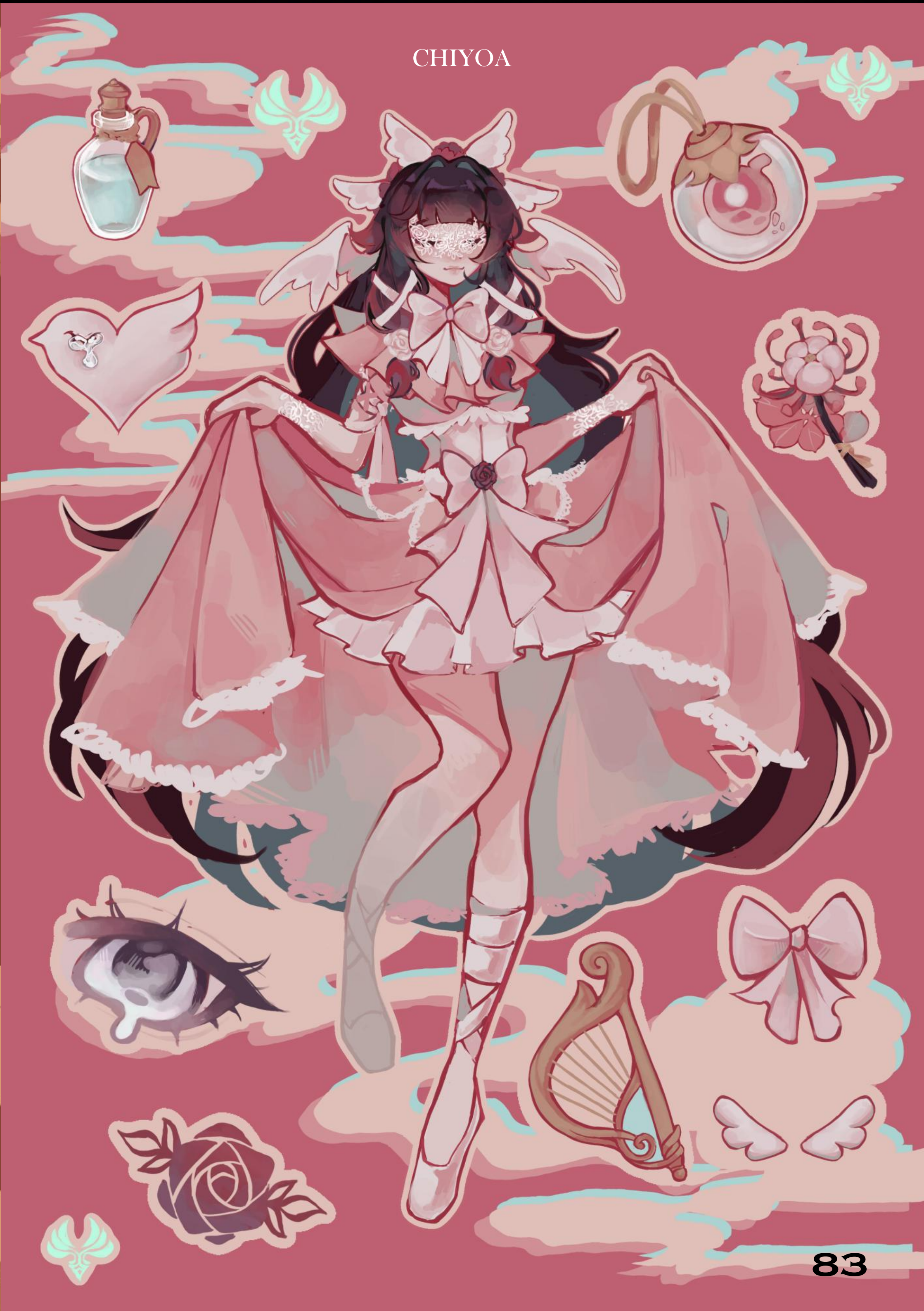

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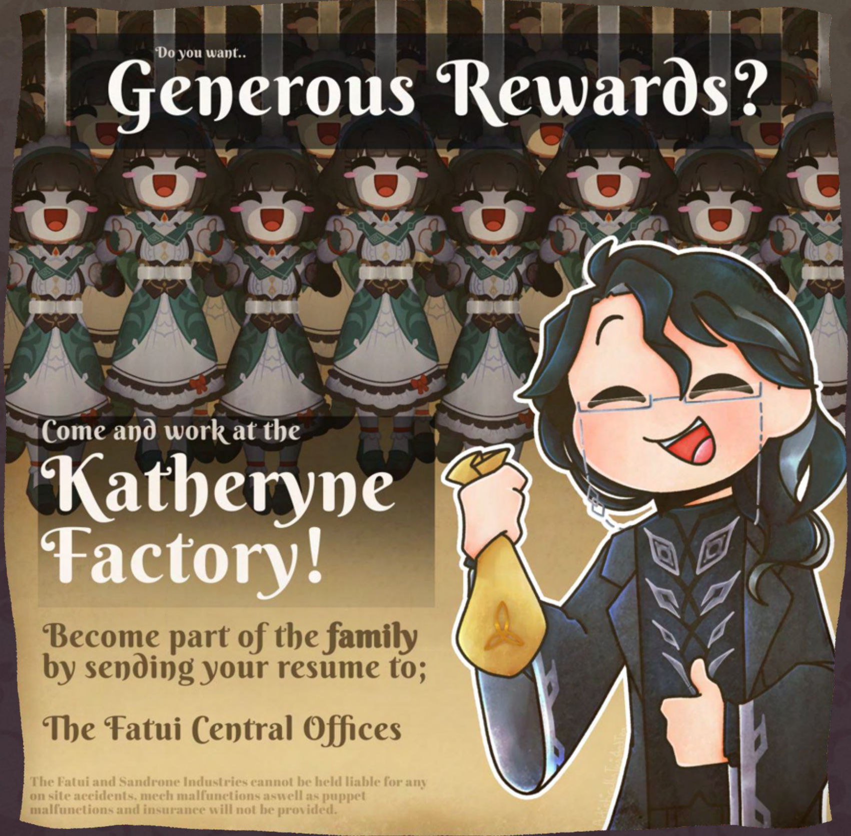
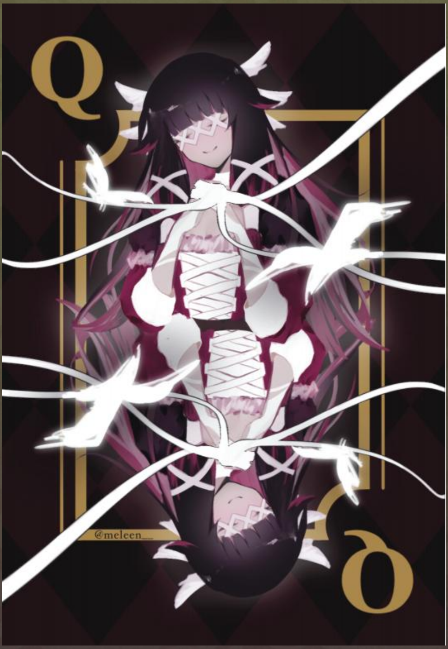
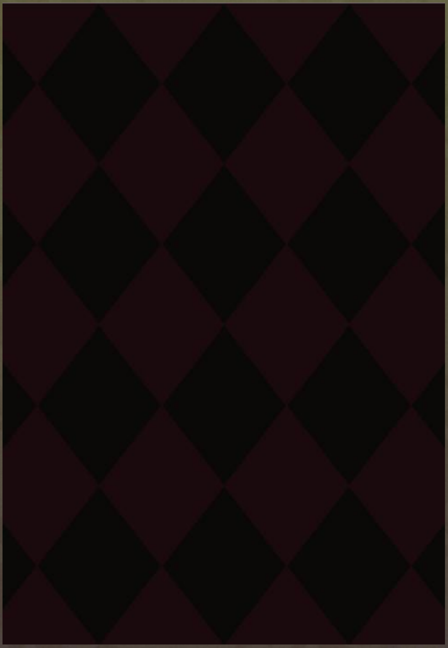
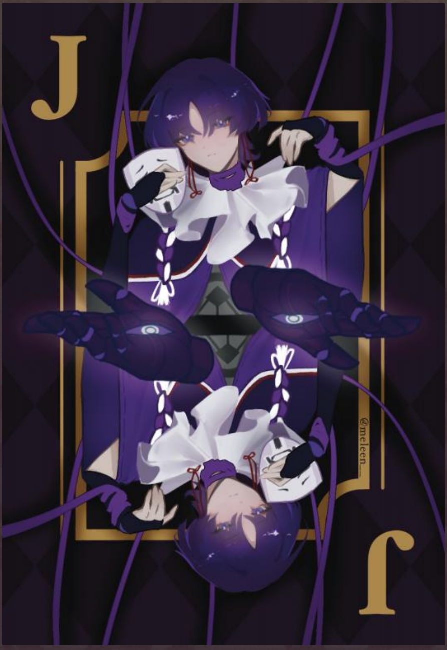
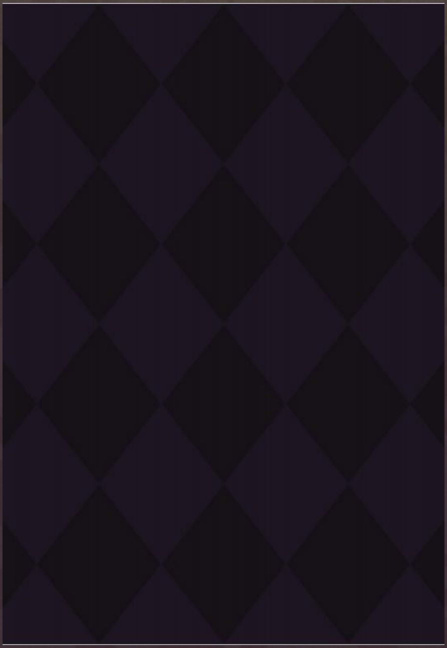

Do you want..
Generous Rewards?
Come and work at the
Katheryne Factory!
Become part of the family
by sending your resume to;
The Fatui Central Offices
The Fatui and Sandrone Industries cannot be held liable for any on site accidents, mech malfunctions aswell as puppet malfunctions and insurance will not be provided.

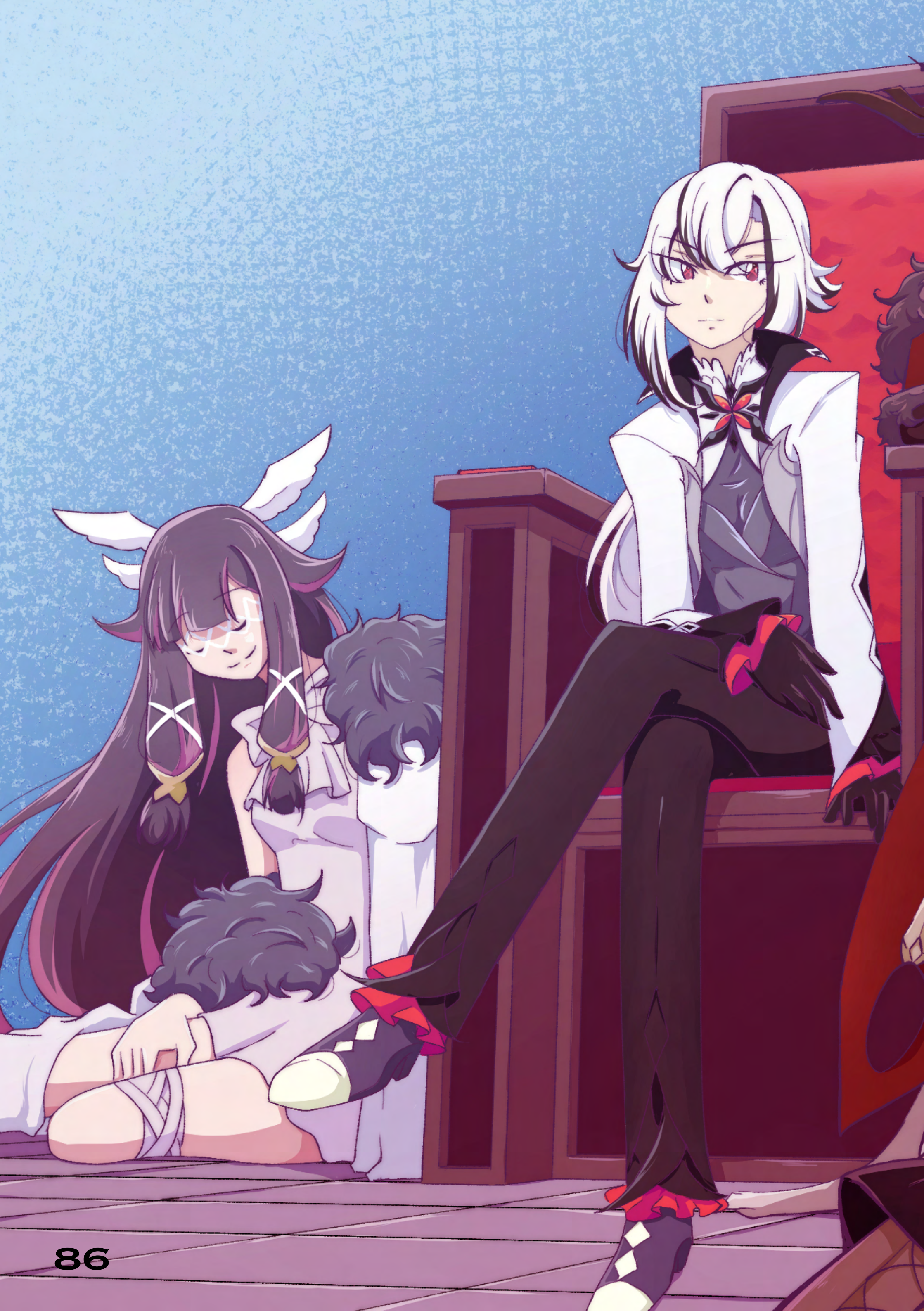
MELEEN











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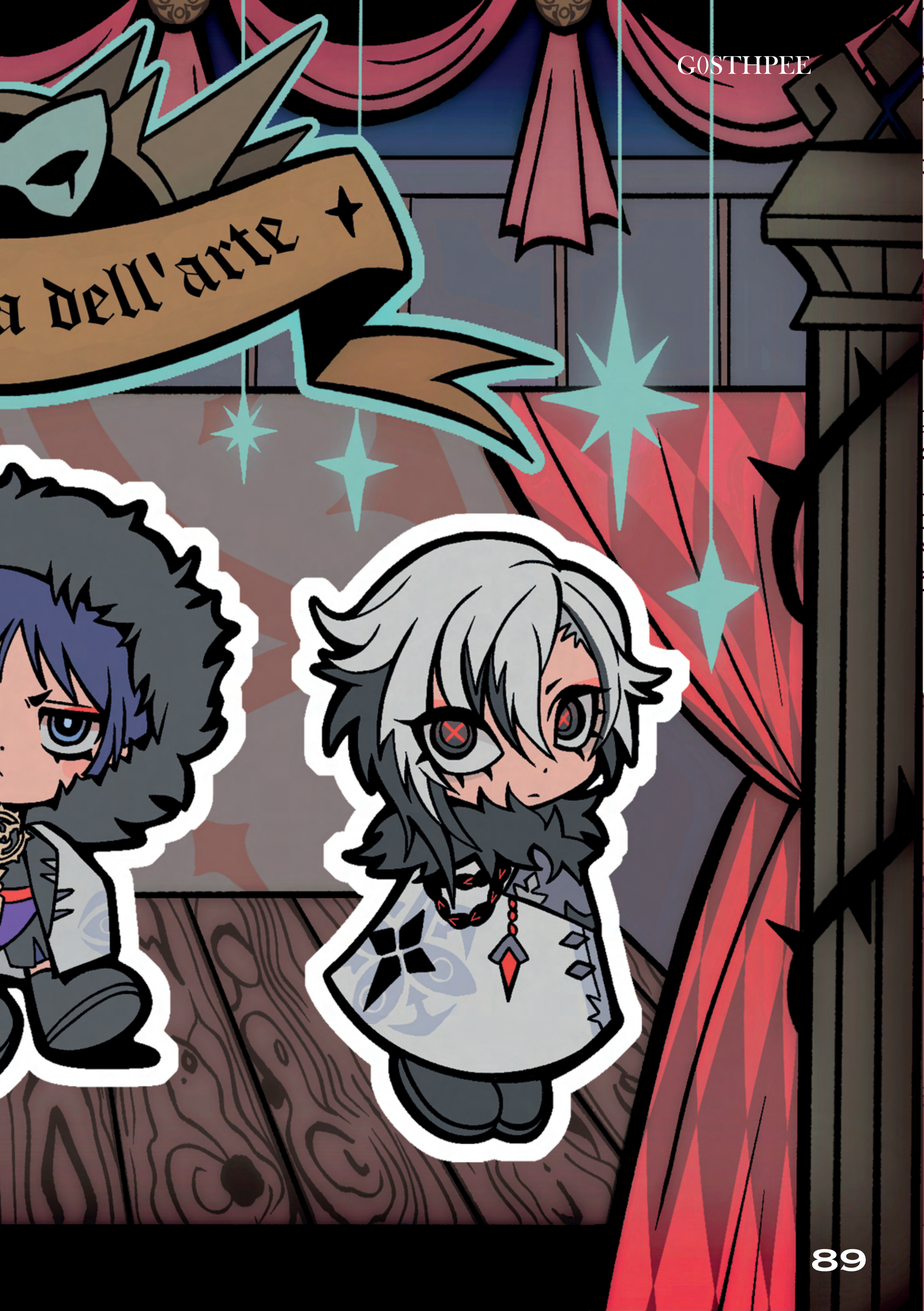

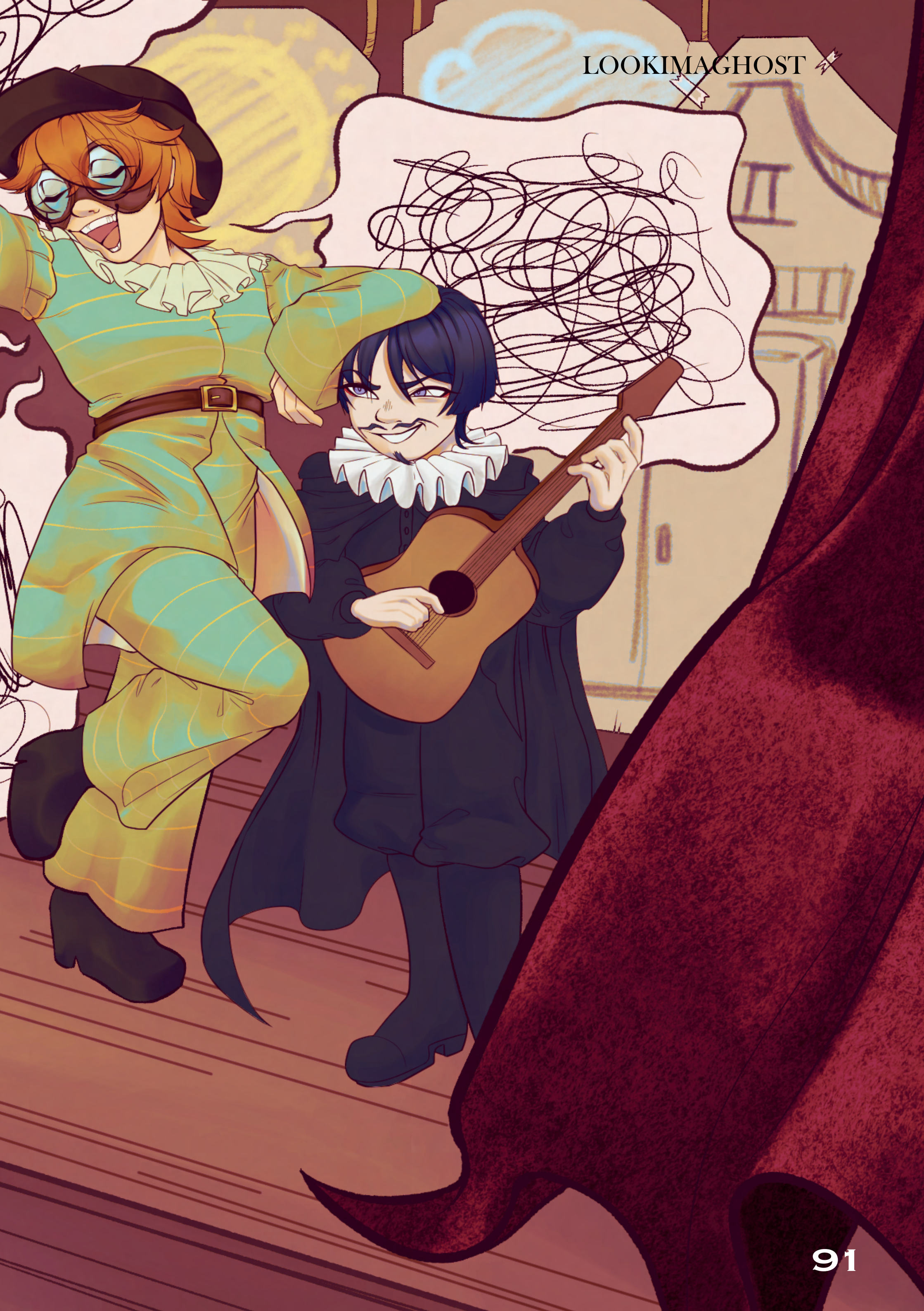
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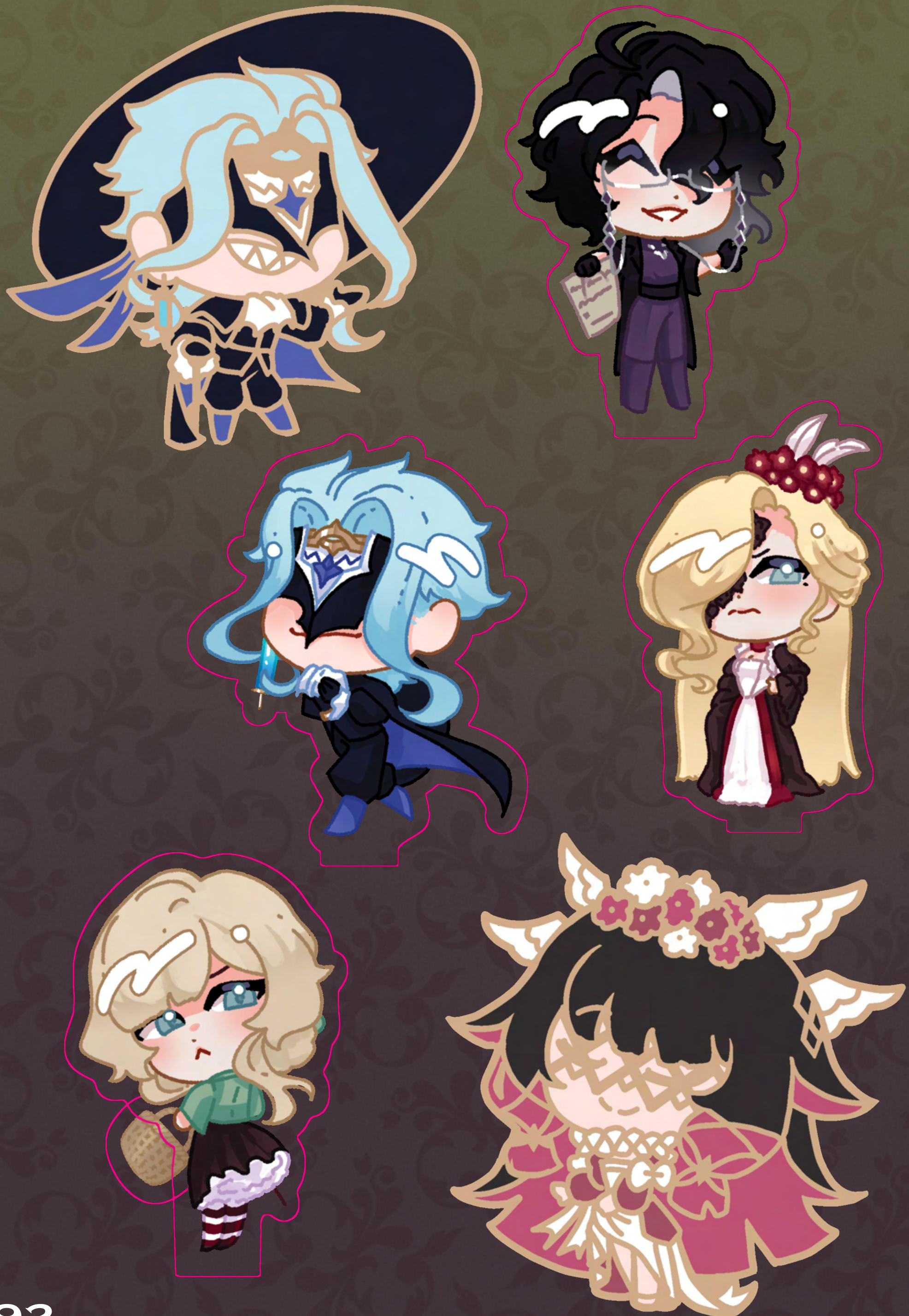

MELODY

Ennezine is a group project that aims to produce multiple collaborative zines with different points of view through different forms of art.

La Commedia Italiana is Ennezine’s first project.

Genshin Impact’s Fatui Harbingers are named after Italian Comedy’s character. Some reference features are taken from the original characters, but this is not always the case.

That’s why, instead of stopping at a too thorough analysis, we have chosen to propose different parallels, recalling the mood that *La Commedia Italiana* wants.

ennezine

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